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What happens when two of Japan's finest studios – one renowned for its purebred action games and the other for story and tactical depth – join forces? Starting on p44, we test the blade of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*


ELITE

PLATINUM-GRADE ACTION MEETS TACTICAL ESPIONAGE IN **METAL GEAR RISING**

REVIEWS

DISHONORED
RESIDENT EVIL 6
NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN
TORCHLIGHT 2

#247
DECEMBER 2012



The best games are built atop a heritage of ideas



It's always tempting to see in games the unmistakable marks of certain developers. Identifying flourishes and signature ideas, it's satisfying to neatly draw lines between releases. Human nature is anxious to categorise even the complex systems that make up games, and we like authorship so that we can peg creative expressions to names in the hope that their personalities will provide some clues towards understanding their work.

Developers are often keen to exploit these tendencies while promoting their games, pronouncing things like, "Multiplayer is in the DNA of our studio." These statements are an attempt to claim the kind of long-held expertise that you can trust. But most big commercial games are really made by huge bands of roving developers, groups formed and dissolved according to need from a company's internal resources, or outsourced to whichever external studios fit the bill. After surfing the whims of budgets, schedules, marketing departments and IP constraints, any one idea will have been ground into smoothness by best practices and pragmatism.

Some developers' games, however, break through homogenisation, wearing their creators' preoccupations proudly. Through them, you can follow a heritage of ideas that bubble up here in the back catalogue, or are found being refined there. This month, we travelled to Japan to play *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* (p44). One half of it is Kojima Productions' hare-brained but impassioned meditation on redemption and PMCs. The other half belongs to Platinum Games and its 60fps sword action (in which the blade's often being wielded by protagonist Raiden's feet). These two visions chime together better than you might imagine. *Dishonored* (reviewed on p90) bares the same sense of a tradition of values, benefiting just as much from being established on a bedrock of invention. And that's because it's almost as much of a pleasure to recognise a game's conceptual lineage (and see it flower) as to play it.



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The power-armoured troops of *Dust 514* (1) are merely the vanguard of free-to-play's assault on the traditional gaming market. As the business model prepares to convince the still-reticent hardcore, we talk to those behind the next big wave of free-to-play games, starting on p14. Meanwhile, as Nintendo's Wii U (2) readies for launch, we go hands-on with its early lineup on p18 to work out what these games can tell us about the future of the console. Naturally, we need to relax after all that playtesting, so we head over to the appropriately named Wild Rumpus (3), an indie-themed gaming event that combines cocktails with *Super Hexagon* tournaments, on p20. It's a different kind of night out on p22, however, where we reveal that the relaxed developer sessions of GameCityNights (4) will be touring across the UK for the first time. We host a developer session of our own on p24, which finds us talking to Chris Roberts, creator of *Wing Commander* (5), about his time away from the industry and his return to making games with *Star Citizen*. Atsushi Inaba (6), *Uncharted* actor Emily Rose, Peter Molyneux and, surprisingly, Bruce Banner feature in Soundbytes on p26, while on p28 we talk to Gareth Huw Evans (7), director of martial arts action movie The Raid, about the gaming inspirations behind his work and why *Street Fighter II*'s SNES incarnation is his favourite game.



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Up-to-the-minute game news and views

Dust 514 is an ambitious free-to-play FPS being made by CCP. Though exclusive to PS3, it ties into CCP's *Eve Online* PC MMOG

The $1.6 billion battleground

It's a watershed moment as the west's traditional game industry trains its guns on free-to-play

A new generation of free-to-play games is coming. Bolstered by the commercial and critical success of titles such as *Tribes: Ascend*, *Team Fortress 2*, *League Of Legends* and *World Of Tanks*, this new wave is being made by some of gaming's largest and oldest publishers. And it's being made to appeal at least as much to these companies' existing audiences as new ones. These are games for players already immersed in mature genres that have thrived under the traditional publishing model, and still do. Namely, they're military shooter and hack-and-slash action games. And they're not just appearing on PC, but also the often locked-in world of consoles.

This is a watershed moment for free-to-play, then, even if seasoned publishers in the space might scoff at the idea, having built up huge player bases on new platforms, such as Facebook and iOS. For the likes of Zynga or Bigpoint, which operate on the scale of hundreds of millions of players, the audience these games are targeting might be comparatively small, but such gamers are both passionate and willing to spend. This is the point at which the core industry is finally seriously starting to shake up its own business model.

"It feels like something that is better for users, and it also widens our target audience," says **Peter Holzapfel**, producer of *Warface*, Crytek's first free-to-play online shooter. "That was one of the main things: we don't limit ourselves to one snippet of the market that's happy to pay $60 for a game. We're removing every barrier that keeps players away from playing a game."

Just because free-to-play has carved out a big market for itself doesn't mean there are rules for success

Looking at the figures, it's not hard to see what appeals to Crytek; nor, indeed, to Ubisoft, which is making the currently in-beta *Ghost Recon Online*; or Microsoft, which is publishing its own first free-to-play games for 360 in the form of *Ascend: New Gods* and *Happy Wars*. According to market researcher SuperData, free-to-play games generated $1.6 billion in revenue in 2011, and if the trend continues, that should rise to around $2 billion this year. It's therefore a proven model, one that many gamers have already flocked to, and offers a chance for game companies to expand their markets while retaining existing players. It also helps combat piracy levels that Ubisoft's Yves Guillemot said have hit 93 to 95 per cent on PC.

But just because free-to-play has already carved out a big market for itself doesn't mean there are hard and fast rules for success. If you speak to most existing players in the field, they'll tell you they still don't really know what they're doing. Experimentation still abounds. "Nobody knows anything," GamesBrief editor and consultant **Nicholas Lovell** told attendees of the recent F2P Summit in London. "I have





From top: Crytek's Peter Holzapfel is the producer of *Warface*; Thomas Paincon is Ubisoft EMEA's free-to-play publishing director



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All our free-to-play coverage







From top: David Reid, chief marketing officer of *Dust 514*-maker CCP; Theo Sanders, producer of *Ghost Recon Online*; Eric Hirshberg, CEO of Activision Publishing

lots of questions, but no answers. The rules are changing so fast – copy Zynga and you have one set of answers, then the rules change and that's that."

And when the likes of Ubisoft and Crytek come along, taking their triple-A thinking and applying it to free-to-play, they're adding yet more variables into the swirl of principles and techniques that have been coalescing and dissolving over the past few years. Then there's the idea of trying to do it all on consoles, which dictate their own approaches.

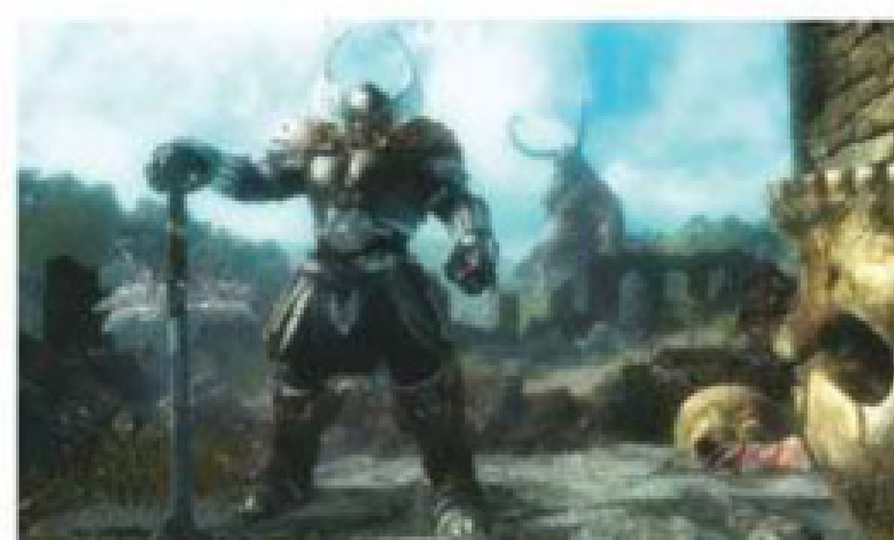
"At Ubisoft, we like a testing run!" says **Thomas Paincon**, free-to-play publishing director at Ubisoft EMEA, who is currently working on *Spartacus Legends*, a gladiatorial fighting game for 360 and PS3. "That's our approach in a lot of ways – we test things and see how they work. The goal really is to see how players on console react, because they're not used to it. Until now, XBLA and PSN had a sort of fake free-to-play with demos: the judgement element wasn't the game, just the demo, and if the demo was crappy then the conversion was very low and you didn't sell anything."

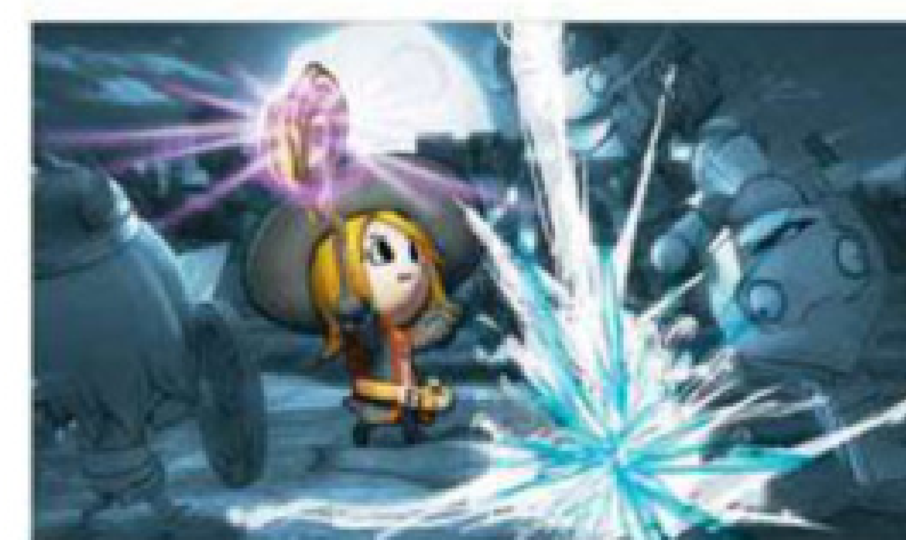
PS3 is already home to free-to-play games, of course, among the earliest being Sony Online Entertainment's *Free Realms*, a MMOG for children, and *DC Universe Online*. The first free-to-play game on 360 will be Playlogic's *Happy Wars*, a multiplayer action-strategy game released this month, and the next will be hack-and-slash action game *Ascend: New Gods*, due for release next year.

Given the spiralling popularity of *World Of Tanks* and *League Of Legends* on PC, consoles have been slow to embrace the model, and there are still fears that these players are wary of it. "Like anything else, people are going to need to see a success story or two before they get really confident with it," says **David Reid**, chief marketing officer at CCP, which is currently producing the PS3-exclusive free-to-play shooter *Dust 514*. "Not that it won't happen, but these transitions have always started on the PC and then become bigger and even more broadly accepted on the console."

Partly, perhaps, because free-to-play still suffers from the widely held view that it's not tuned for hardcore games – that it's for 'casual' gamers. "For us, it's utterly critical that by saying we're free-to-play we don't want anybody to think we've gone soft," says Reid, anxious to assert *Dust 514*'s credentials. "We're not making a casual game here, and we're not chasing that business. What we are doing is making a game for gamers that has a business model we think works best for this particular style of game."







Hawken **(top) was always destined to be a free-to-play game, inspired by the success of some of Nexon's shooters.** ***Ascend: New Gods*** **(left) and** ***Happy Wars*** **(right) are Microsoft's first stabs at the model on 360**

Crytek's Holzapfel has similar preoccupations: "Reactions [to *Warface*] have ranged from, 'Wow, it's Crytek for free. Awesome!' to, 'Oh man, now you're going F2P, too. Why?'" And to counter this perception, he describes *Warface* as: "A triple-A Crytek game in essence; Crytek for free, essentially. There's not much reason why our core fans, especially from the PC community, should be alienated by it." This notion is made clear even on Crytek's website, where the game comes with a tagline that bills it as the point where, "triple-A quality and instant accessibility collide".

Triple-A quality, then, has become the watchword for many making this new generation of free-to-play games, using graphics fidelity to convince players that free-to-play doesn't mean cheap-to-make. It's there in *Hawken*, our cover star last issue, and, perhaps unexpectedly, in forthcoming games from some of the east's biggest free-to-play names. Nexon, the South Korean publisher of *MapleStory*, one of the model's earliest international successes, revealed a new team FPS called *Shadow Company* at Gamescom. It's built in Unreal Engine 3 to counter the long-held problem of "creating the desire to download a game client that's several gigabytes in size", according to Nexon Europe's **André Ruff**. "With good graphics, you can help this along a lot – we feel it's one of the key factors in attracting players."

Another big issue is the west's aversion to the concept of paid-for advantage-giving items. "This is obviously a hot topic in the European market," Ruff admits. "Nexon performs pretty well, but is still trying to provide non-paying users [with] the same amount of fun paying users get… Obviously, selling gameplay



Warface is a multiplayer FPS for PC being made by Crytek Kiev using CryEngine 3. Originally aimed at the Chinese market, Crytek announced in August 2011 it would launch in the west, too. It may also appear on console

advantages makes it easy to sell stuff, but we think a more balanced approach fits the European market."

Ghost Recon Online's developers came to the same conclusion, originally taking inspiration from what was being made in Singapore – the city in which the game's being developed – South Korea and China before deciding that "exploitative" mechanics, as producer **Theo Sanders** terms them, and simplistic gameplay weren't going to work for *Ghost Recon*'s brand and audience. The game's beta has proved the decision was wise. "[Beta players] were very, very, explicitly clear with us that if the game was pay-to-win – or perceived to be pay-to-win – that they would leave." Accordingly, *Ghost Recon Online* makes all the items in its store available for both play-earned and real-world currency.

That experience proved to Sanders just how much of a challenge making a free-to-play game is, even for seasoned developers. Having to constantly move with the players, convincing them to play in the first place and then keeping them engaged, is a completely different proposition from the boxed game model Ubisoft was founded upon. "If your systems, your technology, even the very fundamental design of the game can't react well to consumers, you're going to be in trouble," says Sanders. "From the beginning, you're thinking about what happens after you ship."

"It's utterly critical that by saying we're free-to-play we don't want anybody to think we've gone soft"

But these companies are clearly seeing these challenges as worth attempting. "If you have a good game, free-to-play is really the best model right now to attract a lot of players," says Ubisoft's Paincon. "On PC and on mobile, it's now the standard; everyone's used to it. Even the younger generation, teens and kids, they're used to being able to play for free at the beginning and then pay if the game appeals to them. It's just the way people are thinking. Of course it's a risky business, and it's not black and white, but we're really confident right now."

This doesn't mean the end of the traditional boxed model. Not, at least, for its incumbent leaders. *Call Of Duty* may have recently been made free-to-play in China, but Activision has no plans to bring that to the west. "The free-to-play model is the widely adopted model in the Chinese market – that's why we're adopting it there," says **Eric Hirshberg**, CEO of Activision Publishing. "The other model is successful in the west and is working well for us, so there's no reason to disrupt it."

But for any new property going up against such behemoths, the accessibility and impact of free-to-play will be powerfully appealing. Now the barriers have started to come down on console, it seems likely we'll see most new IPs launch as free-to-play – even if no one quite knows what they're doing yet. But with experimentation and the ambition for quality that these games are striving for should come a multiplicity of fresh ideas, making this revolution an increasingly enticing prospect for all of us. ■

FREE AND SINGLE

One of the hallmarks of the triple-A games that this new breed of free-to-play title is attempting to live up to is a focus on singleplayer, yet the great majority of free-to-play games focus on multiplayer. Crytek is attempting to change that, though. "It's going to be more challenging to create a singleplayer experience in the F2P space, sure, but I think there are ways to make singleplayer social," says Holzapfel. "There are examples out there that have done it. Co-op, for example, if you narrow it down, can still feel like a very cinematic singleplayer experience. It's a tricky one to answer – it's going to be a challenge that's for sure – but we'll try to explore it further."

Ready to launch?

Getting to grips with Wii U's first wave and what it says about Nintendo's next-gen strategy

Nintendo home console launches tend to have a few things in common: strong firstparty titles; middling thirdparty support, with mixed-bag ports and some intriguing (if uneven) proprietary projects; and – since the Nintendo 64 at least – a divisive controller. Our time with a sampling of Wii U's launch lineup at Nintendo Europe's Frankfurt HQ reveals the new console is set to continue this tradition, albeit with a few surprises.

One such surprise is the difference between the size of Wii U's GamePad and its lightness and comfort in your hands. It might look like an Etch A Sketch, but it's well designed ergonomically. The curvature of the triggers on the underside raises the device when it's laid down for tabletop viewing or tapping, adding to the sense that Nintendo's industrial designers have accounted for every detail. It has inherited the D-pad buttons and twin analogue sticks from the Wii Remote and Nunchuk – similar in both proportion and material – providing a level of familiarity to what might otherwise come across as an unusual tablet-controller hybrid. The screen is sharp and as responsive as you'd expect a touchscreen to be, providing an inviting and intimate alternative to the big screen for viewing the likes of *Rayman Legends* and *New Super Mario Bros U*.

Nintendo Land boasts the most floor space at the event, and reveals the most about Nintendo's approach to its new system. A collection of minigames themed around its core properties, it riffs on the likes of hide-and-seek (with Mario Chase) and carnival shooting galleries (Zelda: Battle Quest). These familiar game types place *Nintendo Land* as a kind of heir to *Wii Sports*. But other games in the collection, such as a *Metroid*-themed Horde-esque effort, move towards more traditional videogame territory. Moreover, *Nintendo Land*'s pick 'n' mix attitude to the company's colourful established series presents them to Wii U's audience from the off, rather than dressing its introductory games up in the muted Mii clothing of *Wii Sports*.

Novelty like ZombiU may be thin on the ground, but there's enough variety in Wii U's first wave to satisfy

Nintendo Land also seems anxious to underline Wii U's multiplayer capabilities. While *Wii Sports* could entertain lone players well enough, *Nintendo Land* is a much more family-focused affair, as the constant presence of company employees-cum-playmates at each of the demo units reinforces. Mentioning singleplayer just results in furrowed brows and shrugs, and it's easy to see why with games like Mario Chase and Pikmin Adventure at their chaotic best with at least three players in the mix.



PACK SHOT
When it launches in the UK and Europe on November 30, Wii U will come in two flavours: Basic and Premium. The Basic model comes in the familiar white of the original Wii, while Premium nets you a black exterior. More than style issues, it's the memory that will be the deciding factor for consumers, with the Basic offering a rather paltry 8GB and the Premium a more reasonable 32GB.

Just as *Nintendo* *Land* reveals much about its parent company's approach to Wii U at launch, the thirdparty games demonstrate the takes of their developers and publishers. There are safe bets: the Wii U version of *Assassin's Creed III* will survive comparison with its 360 and PS3 peers. Less timely are ports of *Mass Effect 3* and *Batman: Arkham City*, and there are seemingly rushed conversions, too; *Sonic & All-Stars Racing: Transformed*'s framerate and gimmicky GamePad use don't bode well. There's also a middle ground of competent ports, such as *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* and *NBA 2K13*, that make some odd design choices to honour the platform. *Tekken*'s use of Mario's iconic power-up and poison mushrooms, for example, distorts its balance to the point of ridicule.

Most intriguing among Wii U's early thirdparty lineup is Ubisoft's *ZombiU*, which has been built specifically for the console. It has GamePad-based features, such as a touchscreen inventory, and uses the controller to support asynchronous multiplayer by allowing one player to be a gamemaster while the others see the action on the TV.

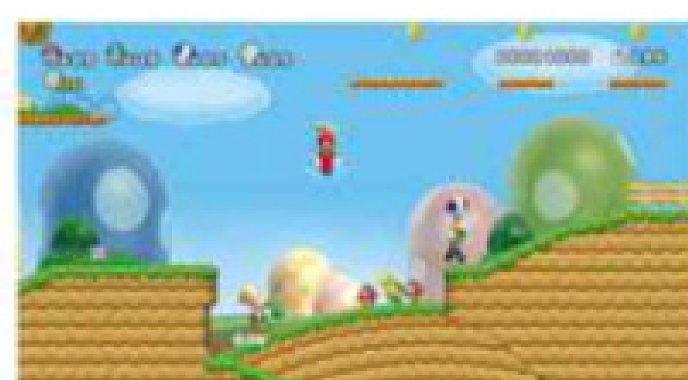
ZombiU is precisely the kind of game needed to sell the Wii U. Novelty like this may be thin on the ground, but there's enough variety in Wii U's first wave to satisfy a wide audience. That doesn't mean it will face an easy ride. It may be the only new kid on the block this Christmas, but the challenge is proving the Nintendo difference is still enough to tear focus away from the old familiars. ■

www.edge-online.com/tag/wii_u
More Wii U coverage



NEW SUPER MARIO BROS U

Sure to be a safe bet as one of Wii U's best-selling launch titles, *NSMBU* offers the familiar retro-platforming joys of *NSMB*. Multiplayer sees one GamePad user tapping the screen to plant coloured boxes on the map to aid other players in reaching higher-up areas and collectibles. These platforms fade, however, so timing is essential.





ZOMBIU

Already developing a cult following for its hardcore, *Demon's Souls*-style approach to death and resources, *ZombiU* is probably the grimmest title to debut on a Nintendo platform. On paper it may be an FPS, but the game trades in scares and pace, rewarding strategy and considered survival tactics rather than gung-ho gunplay. There are shades of early *Resident Evil* in the resource management aspect, but don't spend too long tapping away at that inventory or your neck will feel warm breath on it.





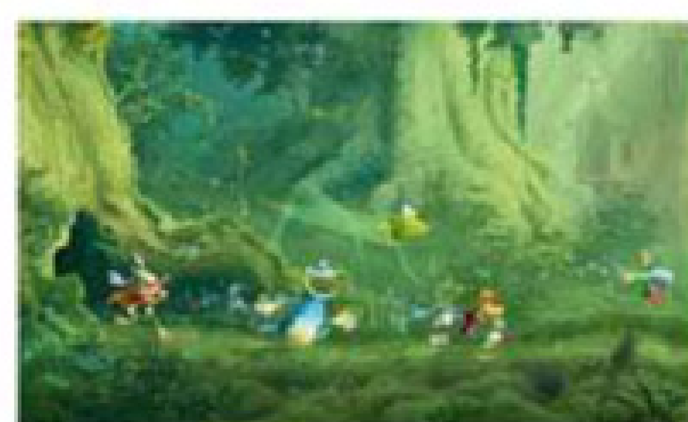




RAYMAN LEGENDS



Nintendo upstaged in the genre it defined? Believe it. *Rayman Legends* is a gorgeous cartoon brought to life – even more detailed and elaborate than the dazzling *Origins* – and in multiplayer it offers a co-op experience worth having friends over for. The GamePad user taps and swipes context-specific areas to help the rag-tag bunch of platformers in their quest, while co-op musical levels are a treat best left unspoiled.



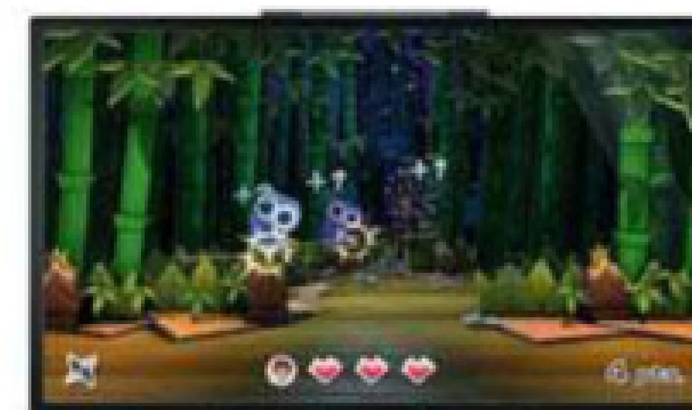
HARDWARE
1 The position of the GamePad's analogue sticks is initially a little jarring, but preconceptions levelled, it soon proves a comfortable and robust controller.
2 Though much of your inputs will be taken care of by a tap or swipe of the stylus, there's a wealth of face buttons, too.
3 The new Pro Controller feels like a more professional iteration of the Wii's Classic Controller Pro, and is sure to be a go-to for players after more traditional input. Players familiar with, say, the 360 pad





NINTENDO LAND

The Nintendo core might cry blasphemy at the sight of their treasured IP exploited for such slight minigame purposes, but the optimist will look at *Nintendo Land* as proof of the company's commitment to Samus and co. This is Nintendo using its most famous characters to introduce its brave new hardware, and it's encouraging to see it wheeling out the likes of *F-Zero*, suggesting these characters and worlds are still – hopefully – very much on the developer's radar.





WILD NIGHT

A new London event takes indie games to the bar

If you'd wandered into the back room of East London's Cargo nightclub in late September, you might've discovered something unexpected: people laughing, drinking and playing indie videogames. One game called *Uprok* is played with nothing more than a simple foot pedal, leaving your hands free to nurse a pint. Another one called *Mega GIRP* (pictured) requires players to temporarily abandon their drink and stretch acrobatically across a mat covered with letters.

Welcome to the Wild Rumpus, billed on the event's website as, "indie videogame night-time roughhousing". The idea was inspired by similar initiatives currently gaining traction overseas. Montreal indie-games collective Kokoromi has one called Gamma, New York City has the indie arcade Babycastles, and Austin-based indie collective Fantastic Arcade has one too: Juegos Rancheros. After playing an early prototype of Doug Wilson's *Johann Sebastian Joust* at the Nordic Game Conference in May 2011, Rumpus co-founders **Ricky Haggett**, Richard Hogg and Marie Foulston found themselves lamenting the fact there wasn't an ideal space in which to play social games of that sort in the UK. "There wasn't any such thing at the time," says Haggett, "so we figured we had to do it ourselves. Hanging out at a bar with friends is really fun."

"And playing games with friends is fun," adds **George Buckenham**, who helps organise the event, "so why not do them at the same time? There are games like *Mega GIRP* that are better or somehow different when played in public – we'd love to expand the numbers of those games. It's great exposing the public to the variety of indie games." ■



Mega GIRP **(above and below) is a physical installation of Bennett Foddy's Flash game *GIRP*, in which you help a climber scale a cliff face by pressing various letter keys**

Deciding on the lineup of games for each Rumpus is a highly technical process. "We have pizza and play loads of games," says Hogg. "The really stupid and rubbish games are my favourite"

On the road

The laidback developer sessions of GameCityNights are going on tour, so consider your stash of excuses dwindling fast



PREPARE TO EVOLVE
In addition to the GameCityNights roadshow, we're also partnering with the upcoming Evolve conference taking place on December 11 in London. Now in its third year, the conference will be tackling such vital industry trends as Windows 8, iOS vs Android, interactive TV, Kickstarter and more. There will even be an Edge Presents breakfast event, featuring regular columnist Tadhg Kelly. Early bird passes are just £245 (saving you £100) if you register before November 7. Find out more at www.bit.ly/cLY4Hb.

Those who don't happen to live in the vicinity of Nottingham probably haven't yet had the good fortune to attend GameCityNights. It's a monthly after-dark event series that brings together game developers, students and players in a relaxed setting to explore how videogames are shaping culture. Don't feel bad – your luck is about to change. **Edge** is excited to be partnering with Maxis' *SimCity* and GameCity to bring the event closer to your city.

"After three years of Nights gigs in Nottingham, and loads of brilliant guests and audience members, it seemed like a good time to share the love," says GameCity director **Iain Simons**. "The one thing we love more than doing GameCityNights events is driving, so this really is the ideal combination for us. We're really looking forward to making some new friends and trying out some new ideas on them."

The GameCityNights tour will kick off in mid-November, starting shortly after the conclusion of the seventh annual GameCity festival. You can find more information from the dedicated website at www.nights.gamecity.org.

TOUR DATES 2012

Nov 13 – National Media Museum, Bradford
Nov 20 – BFI Southbank, London
Nov 21 – Dublin Science Gallery

TOUR DATES 2013

Jan 24 – Antenna, Nottingham
Jan 29 – Arnolfini, Bristol
Jan 31 – The Junction, Cambridge
Feb 5 – MAC, Birmingham
Feb 22 – Animated Exeter Festival
Feb 23 – Margate, GEEK2013
Feb 25 – Carriageworks, Leeds
Feb 26 – FACT, Liverpool ■



Ed Key demos his impressionistic exploration game *Proteus* for a GameCityNights audience. Such presentations offer uncommon insight into the creative process

Interstellar return

Wing Commander maker Chris Roberts on his reentry to the videogame space with Star Citizen

Chris Roberts defined the concept of the epic space combat game with the *Wing Commander* series in the '90s. But after working on *Freelancer* for four years, he quit to be a film producer. Now he's back with a new project, *Star Citizen*, which he's aiming to fund on Kickstarter.


Chris Roberts, creator of *Wing Commander*

In 2002, you'd left EA Origin, set up Digital Anvil, and had a great project in *Freelancer*. Then Microsoft bought the studio and you quit the industry. Why?
I'd been making games at a pretty high level for a long time, and I was feeling like development was taking longer and longer, and that was frustrating. Creatively, I lose interest after two years, *Freelancer* was four years in development when I sold the company, and it was another two years before it came out. And the business was going through this transition: you had to be part of a big umbrella company, because costs were rising, and then you had to deal with the noise that comes with working inside a big organisation. It's not that they're bad people, but when you have 10,000 staff there's a lot of politics, there's a limited budget, and everyone has to fight for their turf – a lot of energy gets expended not on making a cool game.


www.bit.ly/T4Lgct
Our preview of *Star Citizen*

You went into film directing with Wing Commander and then movie production for a few years. How was that?
It was fun. There are aspects of the movie industry that are very applicable to games. At the high end, both industries are risk averse – they want fewer, bigger bets; they want to make sequels. The business side of movies is awful, that's not fun at all, but the creative side, when you finally get to make a movie, that's fun.

So what has brought you back now?
The impetus was that this is a game I wanted to make – I felt that urge again. The technology played into that, because it was enabling; the level of detail is so much higher. For example, the fighter you're flying in *Star Citizen* is about 300,000 faces, which is 10 times what you'd get in a current-gen console vehicle. The cockpit is fully interactive: if you move the camera outside, you can see the pilot's hand on the controls; if you roll, you can see his feet on the pedals. And the game will support Oculus Rift, so you'll be able to look around within the cockpit. It's also little things, like when your Gatling guns move the wires all deform correctly, which means you've got to skin them and do bones, which you normally wouldn't have done because of performance issues. I just wanted you to feel like you're in that cockpit.

Who are you working with?
Right now, I don't have a studio! There are about 10 people who've been contributing and they're spread out. I have people in Austin, some of the old Origin and Digital Anvil staff, we've got people in San Fran and Montreal. And we're working with Crytek, we've built our engine on top of their technology.

What have you learned since *Wing Commander* that will affect this project?
The way the film industry perceives its creatives is something games could learn from. There are no decisions like, 'Spielberg, you're a great director, so you should run Warner.' It's, 'You're a great director. Keep doing what you're doing.' It's a problem in games. With Digital Anvil, it was clear I would be doing more management and less design. You buy a developer because they make great games – let them do that. ■


Star Citizen's nature as an open-ended MMOG means that players will set each other missions, and discover new galaxies

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Would *Bayonetta 2* not exist without Nintendo? The answer is yes."

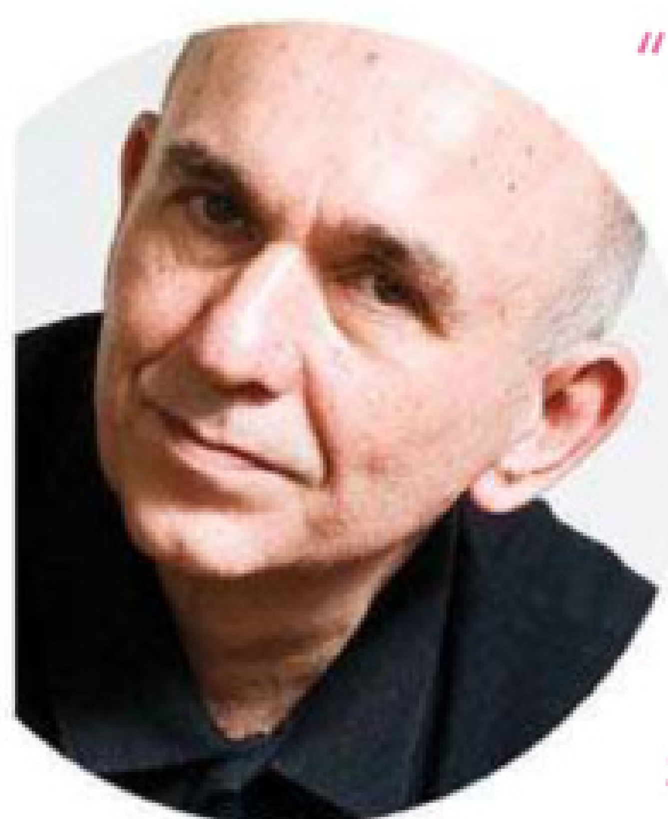
Platinum producer **Atsushi Inaba** on the return of the raven-haired witch

"I've always wanted our videogame, *Uncharted*, to be made into a film and to be able to play my character in that game as a part on a real film."



AP/Press Association Images

Elena Fisher actress **Emily Rose** lobbies for the blockbuster game to hit cinemas



"Why didn't I just do a game? **Why didn't I do Texas Hold'em?** I would have made a shit-load of money and been perfectly happy. Everything I do has to be this service to this big vision, this big idea."

Peter Molyneux asks himself some big questions

"Do you have a Commodore 64?"

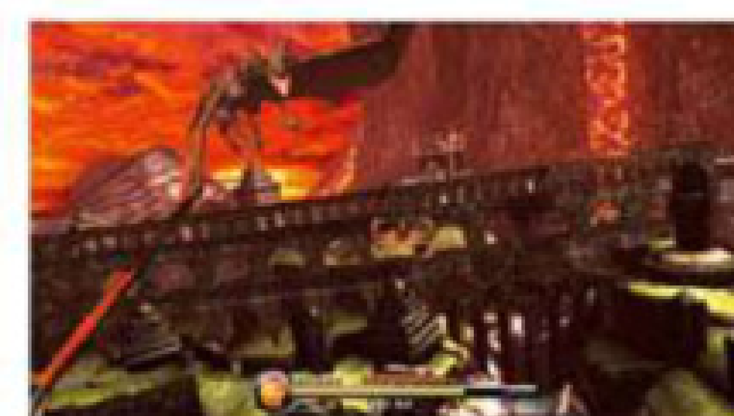


AP/Press Association Images

In an Avengers deleted scene, **Mark Ruffalo** asks the most important question of all of Shield HQ

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Hardware Dream Raiders
Manufacturer Sega Amusements

Following some success with collaborative projects, such as the arcade version of Codemasters' *Grid*, Sega Amusements is going it alone with *Dream Raiders*. It's a relentless co-op cockpit blaster that simultaneously pays homage to two-player gun-game classics such as *Virtua Cop*, and employs mod-cons like wind effects and a gorgeous 55-inch screen.

Perhaps '*Dream Riders*' would have been a more fitting title, seeing as the game has you riding the rails of the designers' vast and varied dream world. This takes in everything from snowy mountain tops while facing down some tough competition to the busy urbanity of cityscapes that evoke everything from classic *Sonic Adventure* stages to fast and furious *Crazy Taxi* jaunts.

The cabinet fits the current trend towards big, bombastic, attention-grabbing rigs, but the architecture rumbling beneath it is made up of components you'd associate with PC gaming – Intel and AMD hardware – being part of Sega's Ring architecture. And this may be a hint that ports to other platforms aren't out of the question for this blast 'em up.



My favourite game
Gareth Huw Evans

The director discusses Silent Hill, losing at Pro Evolution Soccer and how his films have been influenced by gaming

With The Raid: Redemption, Gareth Huw Evans has taken the action movie by storm. His film boils off narrative fat to deliver a lean, mean martial arts masterpiece set in a Jakarta tower block that's governed by a ruthless drug lord. When a crack team of elite police attempt to raid the building, things go from bad to worse to even worse in a matter of floors. With a primarily Indonesian cast and the Jakarta setting, it may be a surprise to hear Evans was raised in Wales in the '80s – the perfect time to encounter the early days of videogames. Taking time out from production on the sequel to The Raid, Berandal, Evans tells us how fighting and horror games have affected his journey.

How far back does your relationship with games go?
It goes all the way back to the BBC Micro, really, *Manic Miner*, and the ZX Spectrum. There was a Bruce Lee game on the Spectrum that I really loved and would watch my brother playing. You'd be chased by a sumo wrestler and a ninja across about 50 levels, and have to start over again whenever you got caught. Then, of course, through uni we'd all be playing the PlayStation.

What game left the biggest impression in the PlayStation era and why?
At university, the *Silent Hill* series was the one that caught my attention. It was introduced to me by my [director of photography] and is one of those games where you're glad not to be holding the controller. I experienced, genuinely, hours of fear… playing those games.

FAST ENEMY
Evans directed his first major film, Footsteps, in 2006, before heading to Jakarta to contribute to a documentary project. The documentary centred on silat, an Indonesian martial art, and while filming he met Iko Uwais, a silat student and former footballer. The pair collaborated on 2009 martial arts film Merantau, and then on The Raid. In Uwais Evans has clearly found his leading man and muse, with the pair currently working on The Raid's sequel, Berandal. Evans has since made Jakarta his new home – his wife's family also come from the region.



The Raid has many parallels with traditional game structure – levels, sub-bosses, the final showdown with a big boss – was that intentional?
There's a subconscious link to games with The Raid, which came about purely because of the premise. A big problem I have with modern action films is they tend to front-load all their best scenes in terms of action and spectacle. So when we set our film in one building with levels, the enemies had to get harder and harder, and we had to up the stakes. The boss had to be at the top, too, or else he'd be taken down in the first five minutes [laughs]. So there's definitely a link there.

Do games have a big presence in Indonesia, where you live?
They're everywhere. There's a retail presence and Internet cafés or game centre-style places in cinemas and malls. I picked up a PS3 recently, so I've been playing *COD* and *Battlefield* – games like that. I'm a terrible gamer, but the thing I like about *COD* is the stealth sections where you're relying on the other character. They're fantastic. I also had a major geek-out moment recently with *Stranglehold*, being able to dive through the air in slow-motion and shoot as Chow Yun-Fat [laughs]. Hard Boiled isn't a film I necessarily wanted to see a sequel to, but as an experience that was cool. There's a blurring of lines between TV and cinema now, in terms of quality and production, and I think we're starting to see the same with games.

> "There aren't many great martial arts action games around. I wonder if [The Raid] could be the first?"

There are inherent shared qualities in certain genres, regardless of format, and I think action and horror in particular have translated and worked well in games.

Can you foresee a The Raid game?
I can definitely see it happening. I don't know that I'd direct a Raid game myself, but would definitely like to have a hand in it, advise in a consultancy role. There are things in contracts about [a game], but nothing has been discussed yet. It'd have to have Iko [Uwais, star of The Raid] motion captured to get all the silat moves in there. But I wonder if you could have shifts in perspective, with firstperson shooting sections and then change to thirdperson for the martial arts I could definitely see it working. There aren't many great martial arts action games around. I wonder if we could be the first?

Do you play during film production?
Oh no, we're far too busy for that. But Iko is a big gamer. I've played him numerous times on *Pro Evolution Soccer* and been beaten repeatedly. I've learned not to even try to take him on any more.

What's your favourite game?
Street Fighter II on the SNES. It was the first home console we had and I was a huge fan of the game in the arcades, so to have that experience at home was special. It ties into my early fascination with martial arts films, and games really tied into that, then anime reinforced it. ■

Evans' fascination with martial arts was imparted through both films and gaming, and has continued on into his filmmaking

WEBSITE
For The Trolls
www.bit.ly/OjDNpi
Who trolls the trolls? Well, this Tumblr takes a good stab at it. Some of the Internet's most impassioned, incensed, and – as is regularly the case – incomprehensible comments on videogame websites, reviews and forums are showcased here, along with a GIF-based response that positively drips with snark. The picture choices are inspired, including pop culture snippets from contemporary quirk such as Flight Of The Conchords and Wes Anderson films, classic and arthouse cinema, with a little TV and YouTube frippery on the side. They're enough to take on gaming's keyboard snipers and win, though by no means do all the hits seem entirely deserving. Then again, you could argue that if you don't have something constructive to type into a comments field, perhaps you shouldn't bother.





VIDEO
Earth Defense Force 3 Portable advert
www.bit.ly/SJB6BM
For every cringeworthy promotional ad (see: Penélope Cruz's recent role as Super Mario for *NSMB2*), there's a gem like this. From cult-favourite director Minoru Kawasaki, responsible for the under-seen Calamari Wrestler, this ad for *Earth Defense Force 3 Portable* is B-movie brilliance defined. Appalling green screens, crash-zooms, overblown one-liners and giant bugs wreaking havoc on urban Japan produce a perfect marriage of advertising and product. It's silly, schlocky, and essential viewing.

WEB GAME
Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf
www.bit.ly/SJBEre
With *Hotline Miami* whetting our appetite for gaudy colours, gutsy shootouts and trippy tales of top-down crime, there's no better time to gorge on another of the fruits of its creative team. Namely, Jonatan 'Cactus' Söderström and Dennis Wedin's oft-overlooked twitch-game opus, *Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf*. A neighbourhood-waking J-pop soundtrack punctuates your journey across the game's various scenarios, which involve takes on everything from *Doodle Jump* and *Rainbow Island*-esque platforming to an endless runner that has your Inuit hero transform into a rabid werewolf. If you're hankering after a little variety and violence seen through a hallucinogenic 8bit filter, look no further than *Keyboard Drumset Fucking Werewolf*.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A pattering of dinguses that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**247

GIOTECK CHALLENGE 2013
www.gioteck.com/designchallenge
If you predicted the likes of the Wii Remote, saw Kinect coming and scoffed at Oculus Rift's reveal, then peripheral manufacturer Gioteck's design competition deserves your full attention. The requirements are simple: sign up and submit your vision for the next big gaming hardware innovation. Twelve finalists will duke it out Dragon's Den-style for the grand prize: a 12-month paid apprenticeship to develop and mass-produce your vision along with an expenses-paid tour of Gioteck's Chinese manufacturing division. A runner-up will get a MacBook Pro and CAD software. The closing date is March 31, 2013. Enter at www.gioteck.com/designchallenge.



continue

Wii U's GamePad
We have high hopes for the conch of living room gaming

Dunwall
It's cheering to see a richly realised new videogame place finding such critical success

Shoulders of giants
There's a fine nod to the Gollop brothers in *XCOM*'s achievements

PS Mobile
A new low-price, cross-platform game market!

quit

PopCap Dublin
The cornerstone of the Irish development scene has sadly closed

Zynga's downfall
A sobering reminder that quick decline can hit even the most successful companies

AAA departures
Bleszinski, Muzyka and Zeschuk – what's up with development?

PS Mobile
Not as low-cost as the App Store, though

TWEETS

Make first, talk second. If you work somewhere that is preventing you from making, leave that place. Don't fill the void with more talk.
David Edery @djedery
CEO, Spry Fox

There's something awful about Google Ads popping up during a game trailer. Being advertised at while being advertised at ADVERTCEPTION :(
Dan Marshall @danthat
Founder, Size Five Games

Banning booth babes addresses a symptom. Let's concentrate on making games appeal to wider audiences, everything else follows.
Andrew Smith @SpiltMilkStudio
Founder, Spilt Milk

That moment when you realize you can tweet whatever the hell you want now because the PR people can't yell at you any more = gold.
Cliff Bleszinski @therealcliffyb
International man of leisure



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DISPATCHES DECEMBER

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers trying out writer Neal Stephenson's fitness regime of running on an elliptical trainer while gaming, thinking about combining pen-and-paper RPGs with videogames, and discussing the role of personal discovery in play. Then in Perspective, **Steven Poole** discusses metagamejournalism and the vital role of meaty criticism, **Leigh Alexander** considers the death of gaming passion, and **Brian Howe** listens in on a dressing down for that time Cole Phelps combined a chicken with a rusty pulley.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 246

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Weapons training

I enjoyed reading the interview with Neal Stephenson in **E**244. I especially liked his idea about working out on his elliptical trainer while playing games. I've always had a few pounds to spare, and I enjoy videogames, so I decided to try it out myself. After doing it for one or two months, I found that it is indeed a great way to exercise. It makes an hour of training go extremely fast; I hardly notice that I'm exercising. Before I always stopped after about 20 minutes (max), because I was watching the clock all the time waiting for the exercise to end and just lost my patience. At first it was a bit hard to keep my balance, and I still slow down when there's an intense section in the game, but I'm getting better at it. Only problem is that I have to keep my glasses on while I'm exercising... I also find it harder to keep my accuracy while sniping, which is a pity, because I prefer stealth and sniping (which is hard enough with a controller). I'm currently playing *Crysis 2* on my PS3 (looks amazing by the way, no matter what the reviews say) and I prefer being mostly invisible and stealthily killing enemies, but playing while exercising it's a lot harder to sneak, so I usually end up running out of cover with my armour on. Come to think about it, maybe it's better, because I get to experience the games in a new way. So I wanted to thank you and Neal Stephenson for being inspirational to me and helping me lose weight – although I've still got some extra left (and right). I hope my letter will encourage others to try it out, and I'd love to hear about their experiences.
Daniel Schweitzer

Congratulations! For your achievements, have a prize 3DS. You can tape it to your trainer, perhaps? It's probably best to switch off the 3D effect if you do, though.

Teasing Tamriel

The first draft of this letter opened with the assertion that *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* is better than *Skyrim*. It was good. Attention grabbing. You know, draw the reader in with an unusual stance and impress upon them what you know to be true. Determined to ensure that Cyrodilic nostalgia was not the driving force behind my verdict, I dissected the two. Graphically, points went to *Skyrim*, due largely to the lack of bipedal potatoes. Possessing not a single Oblivion gate, *Skyrim* also claimed the prize for narrative. In terms of content, too, having witnessed no fewer than 234 hours of my meanderings, *Skyrim* shrugged off the competition. And in the category of fun, well, I begrudgingly conceded that *Skyrim*'s hand-crafted wilderness was the superior playground.

"But *Oblivion* is still better!" I prepared to proclaim 200 words in. "It has those cursed gates, yet it's better!" My reasoning was thus: despite the procedurally generated terrain, despite distant textures with all the clarity of soup, and yes, despite those gateways to questing limbo, I truly lost myself in *Oblivion*. It felt bigger, and it felt wilder, than *Skyrim* has ever done. *Oblivion* stirred wanderlust, which was painfully diluted in its sequel's opening hours. But the words wouldn't come. I couldn't properly organise my thoughts as to why this should be the case when *Skyrim* so ruthlessly dominates upon direct comparison. Objectively, it is the better game.

Having eliminated nostalgia as a suspect, I wonder if this paradox might instead be a product of the publishing process. When I bought *Oblivion*, the singular factor driving my decision was a brief mention by **Edge** in Still Playing. It was an off-the-cuff purchase that resulted in weeks spent enchanted by an utterly alien land. In the months that *Skyrim* spent on pre-order, however, I flung myself at the sea of available information in my excitement – interviews and articles, screen-shots and videos, right down to the frame analyses. Come launch day, I ventured out into *Skyrim* with purpose, with goals based on what I knew to exist. *Skyrim* was a known quantity. I worry that, reluctant to pass up any opportunity to draw in a buyer, publishers are increasingly spilling their secrets long before showtime. Surely a magician should know better than to reveal the intricacies of his trick when fans so easily become victims of their own curiosity.
Angus Morrison

It'd be folly to begrudge publishers for trying to entice players with details of their new games, but they sometimes show too much. Ultimately, it's up to fans to control themselves. That said, it does seem a little too much to have to impose on oneself the media blackouts that many of our friends tend to opt for around their most anticipated game releases.

Gamemaster

Before I start, I know I'm a fussy bugger when it comes to games. I love richly crafted adventures and great stories, and I play very few casual or multiplayer titles. I love the *Uncharted* series, *Enslaved*, *Assassin's Creed* and all that. But occasionally I find that playing through somebody else's story just isn't that satisfying. Sometimes linear is too linear. I'm writing this because, at 34 years of age, I've finally found myself getting into tabletop roleplaying games. I never really had the chance as a teen, when people normally first encounter the hobby. About a year ago, I managed to get involved with a D&D (fourth edition, if you're counting) game. Since then, I've started running my own games based on a Doctor Who system.

What I think pen-and-paper gaming offers over videogaming – as technology currently stands – is that the direction the ➋

game takes, the places journeyed to, the characters met and the adventures had are entirely the result of an organic agreement between the players and the gamemaster (GM). Players naturally don't pick up on or follow things they don't instinctively find exciting, and a good GM will tailor the adventure to the tastes of the players and try to create scenarios in which each player can make a contribution using their character. There is no detailed plot design up front, because there is no guarantee that the players will act in the 'right' way to follow the plot. Furthermore, if a GM really needs to steer wandering players back on track, then this can be achieved with natural narrative methods, rather than an invisible wall (or the threat of 'imminent desynchronisation').

I wonder if videogames will ever be able to deliver this kind of experience? I've only recently caught up with *Minecraft*. I'm impressed with how much I feel like my own narrative is building out of the events that happen to me and the way the landscape changes as I progress. I'd almost like there to be another person on the other end providing an antagonist and constructing a narrative on the fly that fits around the world I am creating. Valve previously talked about using Steam to track the decisions players make in-game and how they respond to certain ideas. Many other game developers talk about next-gen consoles' power being better used for advanced AI and procedural generation rather than higher-definition graphics. Would it be possible to create an AI gamemaster who can create new scenarios and shape them in the direction the players seem to want? Or is there room in the market for a game that allows one player to take on the role of a GM and shape a multiplayer experience for other players? I'd like to see that.
Chris Jarvis

"Is there room for a game that lets one player take on the role of a GM and shape an experience?"

Funny you should ask, because Wii U's *ZombiU* will feature a multiplayer mode in which one player directs zombies on GamePad while others fight them on the TV. In fact, Wii U's asymmetric setup seems peculiarly suited to this game type.


Inspired by Neal Stephenson, Daniel Schweitzer has been running on an elliptical while playing *Crysis 2*

Middle management

In **E**245's Knowledge article Middle Dearth, you mention that middle-tier films don't suffer the same fate as middle-tier games, and that they still enjoy a healthy audience. It is an observation that makes the same fundamental mistake made when people talk about games being bigger than films because of the money spent on them.

The fact of the matter is that, depending on where you live in the country, and the time of day you go, you can see between three and six films for the price of one game. If you own one of the unlimited cards offered by most cinema chains, you can see as many top-, middle- and bottom-tier films as you like without spending anything close to what you will on a game. It is also far easier to justify a tenner on four separate occasions than it is to justify one £40 spend. Our rational brain tells us it's the same thing, but when the wallet is out, it's a different matter.

Add to that the time investment that needs to be made (by the time you've watched a 150-minute film, you're really just getting started with a game), and saying that players will only pick one is no great revelation or insight.

While there seemed to be a suggestion that it's a shame for the makers of quality titles to come a distant third and be considered a failure, it's frankly their own fault for not recognising the obvious mathematics. They need to learn more from their bottom-tier independent friends. Learn your place, learn where to compete, and learn how to compete there. As long as the joyous entertainment of titles like *Sleeping Dogs* exists on the same shelf as *Call Of Duty* and other empty 'top-tier' experiences, there is surely a more rewarding future to be found in the middle ground.
Andrew Merson

The problem lies in the fantastic budgets it requires to make and market games that can possibly sit alongside *Call Of Duty*. It's impeding experimentation with new IP and game ideas in the boxed game market, and that's a loss for all of us. There's lots of innovation elsewhere, but it means top-tier games are increasingly conservative.

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

Whatever happened to the middle-tier of videogames?

It strikes me as odd that small profits are deemed unworthy by the big publishers in the gaming industry. Even in Hollywood, some of the big studios in the film industry have their own smaller areas that are devoted to lesser, more niche and destined-for-tiny-profit movies (Fox Searchlight, Sony Pictures Classic, etc). It indicates a desire to put out pictures for the good of the medium. In gaming, the publishers don't seem to care about this kind of thing really.
Blue55, Edge website

Surely the reason that risk is better embraced in downloadable content (be it full games, or DLC) is the lower cost of entry? It's an old, oft-raised point, but unfortunately the high-end, mainstream videogame industry just keeps pushing the price of games up, and £50 to £60 simply isn't an appealing amount of money to lay out on anything but a sure bet.
Glottis, Edge website

Has iOS 6 made discoverability on the App Store worse?

I don't feel like this is a bad thing. I strongly suggest you invest in some marketing. There are many ways to promote that don't require a lot of money. It can take some work, but when it comes to a game or app you presumably spent a lot of time and hard work creating, spending a few hours every day on social media sites, blogs and forums trying to spread the word should be something you are happy, if not eager, to do.
Cannibal Shogun, Edge website



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

The trials and pitfalls facing the modern game journalist, and what it means to be a critic

What is wrong with videogame journalism? Of late, that has seemed to be one of the most pressing questions for videogame journalists themselves. A cynic might respond with smarmy condescension: ah, look at the geek-haired scribblers in this young critical genre struggling to work out what on Earth it is they're actually doing! But there's more to it than that, and it's not as though music or film critics ever complacently agreed to stop discussing their craft once their professionalised eyries were established.

This tsunami of metagamejournalism has coincided with renewed arguments about the utility of book reviewing, so it's tempting to compare the issues as someone with a foot in both camps (and, presumably, freakishly long legs). Both waves of self-analysis have been provoked in part by a perceived existential threat. As much-loved magazines such as Nintendo Power close down, and mewling Internet freetards expect to be able to read anything for free, it's increasingly difficult to get paid for writing about games. Similarly, newspaper editors, in their wisdom, wonder why the voice of a professional book reviewer is worth more than voluminous unpaid below-the-line comment snark. So it seems urgent for both videogame journalists and literary journalists to justify their existence.

Perhaps part of the reason videogame journalism in particular feels so unsure at the moment is because the term encompasses two different activities. First, there's reporting on deals and moves in the videogame industry. Second, there is the critical evaluation of a finished work of art. In other fields, it's not often the case that the same writer does both. Anthony Lane reviews films in the New Yorker but does not also report on mogul transfers or box-office stats for Variety. In videogames, writers routinely do both – most of the time with integrity, but it's the lack of a firewall between the practices that sometimes provokes worries about corruptibility.

Consider, too, how weird it is that in videogames we have this unique journalistic form: the in-depth preview. Does Jay-Z invite music hacks to the studio when he is laying down tracks for a new album and invite them to fiddle with the EQ on the snare? He does not. Does Philip Roth usher literary hacks into his shed and bark out paragraphs from his unfinished novel? Dream on. But this is what happens in interactive entertainment, and I am no more immune than anyone else to its titillating drip feed of information, the videogame world's carefully choreographed Dance Of The Seven Veils. (I watched the trailer for *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes* with more Pavlovian salivation than a book-catalogue blurb has ever induced.)

> I think a review should be as intellectually aggressive as the writer feels is necessary

The threat of withholding such preview access, of course, can be used to try to 'manage' critical comment. But critical comment worthy of the name is rare enough anyway. The fact that One Life Left gives seven out of ten to every game it reviews is still funny years on because most reviewers are still grading on a curve where a game that is average and conventional (and "thus not useful, thus burdensome, thus noxious", as Milan Kundera once splendidly wrote of mediocre novels) gets a seven for fear of offending advertisers. Yet this problem of bland overpraise is not unheard of in other genres.

Indeed, one of the strands of the latest metabookreviewing discourse has people worrying about whether some reviews are too nasty. I think a review should be as intellectually aggressive as the writer feels is necessary to counter what they consider to be meretricious bullshit. As Samuel Johnson said, every author courts fame at the risk of disgrace. In videogames as in books, it is just as important – and respectful of the glorious potential of the form – to smack talk the garbage as to praise the good stuff. Be suspicious of any reviewer who is not on occasion roused to controlled apoplexy by a work that evinces contempt for its audience. The really hostile critic is an optimist, writing from a belief that things could be better.

It is righteous work to denounce the crass sexism of the videogame world (metal-brassiered heroines, girlfriend mode, brogrammers) or its products' casual endorsement of torture; but it's also possible to be too pessimistic and insular, and forget that such faults are hardly new to anyone who has ever gone to a cinema or turned on a television set. And yet some films and TV shows enhance our lives, just as some games do.

The imminent launch of a new videogame website named after a regular geometric figure (documentary trailered with hilarious self-importance) is not, I suspect, likely to solve all the problems of videogame writing at once. But perhaps I can suggest one small conceptual realignment. When I'm writing book reviews, I am not part of the publishing industry; I'm on the side of the readers, squinting through the hype-smoke. Similarly, though it's nice to feel you belong, a videogame journalist should always remember that they are not in the videogame industry. They're a member of the global republic of letters. That ought to be a source of sufficient pride in itself.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



marshdavies.com



LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level head

BioWare's Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka have diminished passion for games. They're not alone

The announcement that BioWare's founding doctors, Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka, would be leaving the studio at which they've made an indelible mark on storytelling and roleplay, took fans by surprise. There's something of an assumption in the games industry that you're in it for life. Lasting 'names' are treasured, and even those who take breaks from their visible roles are expected to return in a Kickstarter age being colonised in significant part by veterans in search of a revival.

The message is that the climate may change or the economy may shift, but one's passion for the games industry generally doesn't. That's why Zeschuk and Muzyka's resignation was so hard for some to get their heads round. *Star Wars: The Old Republic* may be struggling, but the pair didn't bow out gracefully amid layoffs or resurface with some new venture. They said, with unusual candour, they just weren't that interested in making videogames any more.

"I've reached an unexpected point in my life where I no longer have the passion that I once did for the company, for the games and for the challenge of creation," said Zeschuk. Muzyka said he had "personally achieved what [he] wanted in videogames" and there was a "strong possibility" he won't return.

Why is it so uncommon – beyond the fact that personal honesty is quite rare in quotes to the press – for accomplished figures in games to simply feel finished and ready for something else? This is because passion is considered to hold primacy over all other motivating traits in the game industry. I frequently write about how an incredible devotion to the industry is essential to survive the high cost of participation – either the manifold crunch and constraints of commercial development, or the hard-scrabble life of a game writer – and only those with the most feverish commitment will survive.

The result is that an almost-religious obsession with games is a cultural requirement. Game writers receive routine grilling from their voracious readership; we work under often significant scrutiny from vocal fans who want to demand we prove we are qualified to act as leading voices within their beloved hobby. A review score from a veteran writer is something to be dissected and undermined, and readers presume we are absolutely expert at an impossible range of games.

If we applaud politely at press events, we have been bought and are untrustworthy. If we show no emotion, we are jaded and undeserving. We carry high expectations as authority figures, but in the social media age countless voices have easy access to us, so they can fight to be the first to tell us we are wrong. The passion of gamers is part of what makes our work so challenging, and – at the risk of incurring the ire of the hundreds and probably thousands of people who would like my job – taxing. Depressing, even. We're told every day we're living a dream, and we're not allowed to get sad or tired.

There are a small handful of readers with whom I've remained in touch for some years, who routinely send me messages about their great hope to become a game journalist. I give advice where I can, and sometimes they seem to want me to listen as they share their frustration that they haven't gotten yet to where they hope to be.

These are often quite bright and college-educated young people who are accepting free internships and unpaid work and spending swathes of free time piloting gaming blogs. I want to tell them there are hundreds of other things they'd be excellent at and enjoy, but nothing can dissuade them from the sacrifice they want to make in the name of their passion for games.

This incredible emphasis on passion becomes disillusioning as we age, as this console generation drags on, and as the commercial industry matures and becomes mired in sameness. Nearly all my friends tell me they don't have the passion for games they once did. I tell them I don't either – but always in private, never publicly, where the sin of losing passion might be overheard and taken to task.

Nearly all my friends tell me they don't have the passion for games they once did. I don't either

The thing is, we still like games just fine. We still know loads about them, are interested in the industry, have things to offer. Our relationship to them changes with time and maturity – but if you were over the age of 30 and still thrilled to play Nintendo for hours in a basement every day the way you did as a child, mightn't there be something a little wrong there?

We'll still have flashes of love and excellence, but those who've been in games for a long time these days have the option of showing their affinity by the duration, not the intensity, of our commitment. That obsessive fervour, the constant pressure from our peers and audience to be the biggest gamer in the room, the most tireless creator, just isn't sustainable. It would be lovely to finally admit that pure passion isn't everything , and that it can run out.

The BioWare doctors know this – no wonder Greg Zeschuk wants to explore beer culture now.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media





BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

LA Noire's Cole Phelps faces his toughest case yet, but there's something hauntingly familiar about it

The camera pans lazily across an office in downtown LA, revealing a desk drenched in late-afternoon sunlight and casework. Two cops sit in the room, the tension palpable.

"OK, Phelps, from the top. Nice and slow, because I have to explain to the Commissioner why my top detective is standing here wearing a ridiculous monocle and stinking of bananas after dropping off the map for a month."

"Sure, Captain, sure. It was just another Tuesday in Los Angeles, a city on the verge of abstraction. A new type of city, based not on the man, but on the notebook. The notebook, symbol of inventory menus and map hotspots. It's a city where every man can own his own pencil and–"

"Less pomp will be fine, Phelps. Let's just jump into this hare-brained case of yours."

"All right, Captain. I was working the vice desk out of Los Angeles when a call came in about a ghost pirate who'd kidnapped some broad named Elaine. Can't remember the caller's name, but it was something you don't hear much. Mancomb? Dudebroom? Anyway, the case sounded as odd as this fellow's handle, but I was bored stiff, so I took it. As my chauffeur – partner, I mean – drove me all over the city, I was turning up zip. I scratched off locations in my notebook until only the wharf was left. On a hunch, I stowed away in the cargo hold of a banana boat and landed at this little tropical island in under a week."

"Now wait just a minute, detective. You left the city on the job following a tip from someone named Dudebroom?"

"It was a slow vice day."

"Chasing a what?"

"Ghost pirate. Tricorn hat, cutlass and all."

"In a damned banana boat?"

"I had to take the banana boat, I can't swim… Or can I? Sorry, inside joke. Honestly, sir, I think I was just sick of LA – the long nights, the interminable awkward brawls, the mournful trumpet music, all the corpse handling. But, look, I was still doing my job. As soon as I stepped onto the beach, I started scouring it for clues and recording them in my inventory."

"So pleased to hear that you remember LA vice squad protocols even when you're operating wantonly outside of its jurisdiction, Phelps. What did you find?"

"A whole lot of nothing, or so I thought. There was so much junk lying around it sounded like I was walking through a doorbell factory, but I couldn't see how any of it was going to help me figure out where this dame was. In a souvenir shop, I picked up a rubber chicken and muttered, 'This isn't relevant to my case.' I found a rusty pulley and cried, 'Maybe… No!'"

"I'm familiar with your witty banter, Phelps. Did you conduct interviews?"

"Of course, I went strictly by the book. First, I grilled a barmaid at a dive called the SCUMM, but after I called her a filthy liar and shook her by the shoulders for denying that she'd ever laid eyes on this tiny bellman's cap I'd stolen from a wax museum, she clammed up. I don't even know why I accused her of that, Captain; it didn't make any sense. I guess I sort of panicked. That nutty island had me all mixed up. What are you supposed to ask a witness when your so-called evidence is all chocolate envelopes, shrunken voodoo heads and live apes? You know what it's like to carry around a live ape in your trench coat, sir?"

"Shut your trap, Phelps."

"But I just–"

"Shut it! OK, sorry for flipping my wig, Cole. This is just the craziest thing I ever heard. Go ahead."

"Great, Captain. This is where it gets interesting. As I questioned the residents of the island, I tried to read their expressions like you taught me, but those islanders don't have the most expressive faces I've ever seen. Some of them stonewalled me by spouting off monkey-related puns until I wanted to sock them. I'll tell you, I was at the end of my rope."

"And what does the LA vice squad teach you to do when you're stumped?"

"To abandon all logic and start mix-and-matching evidence at random, and that's exactly what I did. I used the rubber chicken with the rusty pulley and got a tetanus poultry pulley. I tried to use the tiny bellman's cap with the live ape, but it didn't fit, so I used it with the shrunken voodoo heads and got the voodoo baby bellboys. Then I used the chocolate envelopes with the live ape, and – because apes are allergic to envelopes – I got the dead ape. I used the voodoo baby bellboys with the dead ape to get the reanimated ape, and used that with the tetanus poultry pulley. Clearly, I couldn't use the rusty pulley myself, sir, but tetanus doesn't bother a reanimated ape. Well, that ape slid right down the zipline to the ghost pirate's mansion. Of course, that was only the first step. Then I had to steal a monocle from a duck and disguise myself as–"

Some of them stonewalled me by spouting off monkey puns until I wanted to sock them

Out of patience, the captain lunges to attack detective Phelps, but they both get stuck against different chairs. Facing in opposite directions, they slowly punch at the air as the *LA Noire: The Case Of The Secret Of Monkey Island* DLC credits roll.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



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Method acting

A persistent aspect of *Far Cry 3* (p64)'s marketing has been a dogged insistence that its hero, Jason Brody, is an ordinary guy, just like the player. Indeed, when the game begins we find Brody living it up as a tourist, but he's forced to swap the fruity cocktails for an assault rifle when events on his tropical retreat spin violently out of control. We're not sure the finished game will convince on the 'just like us' front, especially if the disjoint between his amateur status and his clear martial skills is something it fails to explore, but the focus on creating a character that players can easily identify with is a clear break from the previous games' hard-faced mercenaries.

When players first met this month's cover star, *Metal Gear*'s Raiden, he was similarly pitched. An untested rookie who'd spent more time in VR training than on a real battlefield, the parallels between him and the player were even more heavily underlined than in Brody's case – all part of the grand metatextual joke that was *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s narrative. The backlash was legendary, however, and it's taken *MGS4* and *Metal Gear Rising* (p44) to rebuild Raiden into a character that players want to inhabit. Lightning quick and lethal with a katana, Raiden's no longer a hero for players to see themselves in, but someone they can have fun pretending to be.

Different stories require different types of hero. That much is obvious, but it does highlight an advantage in designing your game around open-ended play, as in *Hitman: Absolution* (p50). The core of Agent 47's personality and appearance are unalterable – he's always going to be a cold-hearted killer with expensive tastes in suits. But in choosing to approach hits with perfectionist patience, black-humoured sadism, or violence, it's left to the player to ultimately decide what kind of assassin he is. It's easy to emphasise with an everyman, or look up to a badass ninja, but you can't help but see yourself in acting as you choose.

MOST WANTED

Yaiba Ninja Gaiden Z 360, PS3
If the teasers for *Yaiba Ninja Gaiden Z* are anything to go by, Keiji Inafune may be positioning himself as the new Tomonobu Itagaki: an outspoken action game pioneer unafraid to deliver Japan-centric titles with a thirst for blood.

Fantasy Life 3DS
Level-5 and the life sim collide to produce what looks like *Harvest Moon* by way of Studio Ghibli. From early glimpses, the gameplay seems as varied and eccentric as it is cute and stylish. The wealth of character and home customisations may even be enough to rival those in *Animal Crossing*.

Halo 4 360
Almost as much as witnessing the further adventures of our favourite green tin man, its the revamped Forge that has us itching to get back into the fight. More intricate and user friendly, the next phase of DIY arena-building ushers in gravity-altering zones for floatier firefights.



Though the game features many weapons, both ranged and melee, Raiden's crackling blade remains the centrepiece

HYPE

METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE

Back from the brink in more ways than one, Raiden gets his chance to shine

Publisher	Konami
Developers	Platinum Games, Kojima Productions
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	February 2013

As we sit on the outer edge of a stark white preview room somewhere within Kojima Productions' Tokyo Midtown office and play *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, Raiden doesn't seem like much of a problem. He's lithe and responsive in his movements; he's stylish and deadly in his attacks. But Raiden is a problem – or at least he has been.

Introduced as the surprise star of *Metal Gear Solid 2* on the morning of its US release, Raiden started life as the punch line in a grand Hideo Kojima joke. You wanted Snake: cynical, dependable and experienced. Instead you got this effete blond rookie who looked downright delicate in a combat suit, and who turned out to have an unsavoury past as a child soldier. He was an ideal avatar for the series' hallmark theme of glorious suffering, perhaps, but he wasn't the one the fans were expecting.

Metal Gear Solid 4 twisted things the other way. Cybernetically enhanced and gifted with a glittering metal blade to complement his glittering metal jawbone, the pale boy had become a ninja, and now people wanted to play as him. This time, however, you couldn't. He was on the wrong side of the cutscenes, and his best moments left you drumming your fingers on a DualShock while he chopped up Gekko mechs and enacted gymnastic bloodletting on a massive scale, even after both of his arms had been lopped off.

Kojima Productions conceived *Rising*, then, as your chance to play those cutscenes. But even that didn't initially go to plan. Unveiled as *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* at E3 in 2009, it promised a blend of stealth and action built around a free-cutting mechanic that would mean Raiden's katana could slice into almost any object he came across. That might be the torso of an enemy cyborg; the supporting column of a townhouse; or, in a memorable end-of-trailer aside, a series of watermelons. The posters promised 'Lightning Bolt Action', and free-cutting seemed to be key, seemingly allowing for a fleet-footed fighting game blessed with knife-point precision.

The curse of Raiden struck, though, and Kojima Productions' action-adventure, much like its star, had to confront death to emerge stronger. The team were struggling with the stealth elements and free-cutting, and by 2011 the game faced cancellation.

That's when Platinum was offered a swipe at it. "I approached Mr Kojima at a party," explains executive director **Atsushi Inaba**. "I asked him how the game was going, and there was no response. The second time I bumped into him, it was another party, and Mr Kojima approached me and asked whether we wanted to make the game. It was very informal, and I thought it was a joke," Inaba



METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE



BELOW **The slicing manages to be cartoonish as often as it is horrific, and Platinum has nailed the period of time a pair of legs should stand up for before toppling over**

Incoming gunfire can be shrugged off in a Ninja Dash, while Raiden's blade can parry rockets if you time his swing correctly





laughs. "The third time we met, it was another event, and he asked our studio head if he could set an actual meeting, then he asked officially if we could make the game. We didn't have much of an opening at the studio, but we felt we had to do it. Not for Kojima, necessarily, but because of the impact it would have [on] the world."

Reborn with a neologistic subtitle, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is now looking surprisingly coherent for a project that has Kojima Productions handling the narrative and the cinematics, and Platinum tackling the design. The bespoke stealth elements have been ditched for an approach that initially feels like classic Platinum thinking. With no sneaking to get in the way, *Metal Gear Rising* is built around a combat system that's muscular and elegant, containing all the launchers and air juggles you'd expect from a game directed by **Kenji Saito**, the lead programmer of *Bayonetta*. Raiden has a wide and a strong basic attack (sometimes fighting with his sword clutched between his toes), plus an array of combos that have more than a hint of *Bayonetta* DNA to them.

Metal Gear Rising's now-revised story drops Raiden into a war-torn African state as part of Maverick Security, a friendly private military company (PMC) that's in the country to aid its redevelopment. With sinister rival company Desperado Enterprises moving in to destabilise things, there's plenty of room for loopy cinematic conflict.

Our demo takes us from a landing zone on the beach-side edge of an evacuated capital to a fight with an animalistic robot boss in the city centre. Based on our time with it, Platinum seems like the perfect fit for a game that offers you beautifully balanced encounters, whether you're battling against cyborg supersoldiers or the terrifying bipedal Gekkos. The studio has also riddled the game with elements to master, such as a parry system that offers two levels of success: slight knockback if your timing's good, or a stun if it's immaculate. It's emblematic of the wider design – Platinum's making yet another game that demands total focus from its players.

In return, the game gives you options. Levels are littered with both opportunities to pick up sub-weapons, such as grenades and rocket launchers, and a series of deranged bosses whose signature armaments can be wielded once they've been beaten. Lurking at the end of the current build is Blade Wolf, a quadruped mech with a chainsaw for a tail and a habit of breaking up attack waves with verbose disquisitions into realms both tactical

BELOW It may be set in Africa, but the demo's grey and grubby architecture suggests Eastern Europe at the end of a disappointing summer. Still, the landscape is far more important than usual in this Platinum game



Hands free

Upgrade systems may be commonplace in modern videogames, but trust Platinum and Kojima Productions to have their own spin on them. In *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, you earn currency for improving your weapons and skills by lopping the left hands off your cyborg enemies, and returning them to Maverick's resident genius, the Doktor, to get their implanted chips extracted. The Doktor's a wonderfully freakish presence – a German scientist with a vast collection of cyborg appendages in his office. His upgrades promise to transform the gameplay, but he also brings a queasy humour to *Rising*'s cutscenes.



LEFT Mistral's fight is set to mad chugging guitar rock. In its weirdness, it's the perfect fit for a series that has sent you against a rollerskating bomb maker and a woman with a robotic octopus head

and philosophical. When Raiden defeats him, he becomes an ally, sneaking ahead to scope out levels and reporting back with crucial intel. Subsequent bosses include Mistral, a latex-clad assassin who can cobble together Dwarf Gekkos to form additional arms. Slicing her to pieces in a multi-stage duel that takes place at night across the pumps and pipes of a gas refinery will provide access to her combination staff and whip. It's an ideal tool for a game that encourages you to get in close, but isn't afraid to have enemies attack from a distance.

Despite these options, Raiden's blade remains at the centre of the action, because it's the only tool that allows you to engage in *Rising*'s greatest pleasure: free-cutting. It may be one of the elements that gave the original development team headaches, but it now seems peerlessly intuitive. A squeeze of the left bumper sends you into Blade mode, where time is slowed down and your right thumbstick allows you to rotate a plane that passes through the centre of the screen. Release the thumbstick and Raiden performs a single sword stroke along the plane, a move capable of slicing clean through enemies and a surprising number of in-game props. There's a learning curve – particularly since camera control remains on the left thumbstick throughout, meaning it's easy to end up facing the wrong way – but within minutes you're triggering Blade mode at just the right moment and performing dozens of slices before the cooldown kicks in.

It's dazzling to see the one-to-one precision that's afforded by Blade mode

The game's VR tutorial encourages you to practise Blade mode on a selection of wheelie bins and watermelons, and it's dazzling to see the one-to-one precision that's afforded, as well as the seemingly limitless number of pieces you can reduce a single object to. On foes, however, it's given a tactical twist, due to a system that encourages you to cut



www.bit.ly/O9H3Ho
Screenshot gallery



METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE

BELOW **Fights are a riot of visual cues for those who want to earn the best ranking. Raiden can parry from any direction, and the animation blends so seamlessly that it never looks compromised**



through particular highlighted spots in enemies to pull out their robot spinal columns, regenerating your own health and topping up your blade energy. This provides a striking climax to each fight, as you slow time, angle your attack, lop through a rival and pulp his backbone before his quivering half-form has even hit the ground.

Meanwhile, to facilitate navigation in a game world that gives you the freedom to slice your way through crucial staircases and gantries, a squeeze of the opposite bumper puts you into a Ninja Dash. This high-speed spin on *Assassin's Creed*'s one-button parkour lets Raiden run up walls, hop between ledges, and vault barriers.

As the current build unfolds, it's not hard to see the joins and separate Platinum's action from Kojima Productions' cinematic but rather overextended cutscenes. Yet the sheer replayability of this short 15-minute sequence suggests this sharply delineated partnership may have resulted in a more complex splicing of genes after all. Bespoke stealth elements might have been removed from *Metal Gear Rising*, but the end result plays like no other Platinum game yet made once you spend serious time with it. There's a far greater focus on the landscape, with a breadth of approaches offered by the game's maps. This creates space for a speculative pause as you enter each new area and weigh up your options. It's a feeling that strongly invokes *Metal Gear Solid*, as it happens, and so does the fact that you're free to choose when and how you enter each battle as you pick your way around the levels. This means you can wait for a guard's patrol route to leave him vulnerable, or drop down from a ledge to stealth kill as many enemies as possible before you're spotted. Like traditional *Metal Gear* games, foes will enter alert states if they become suspicious, and you can still sneak through a surprising number of the environments without being spotted if you toy with the AI and take your time.

"There's been a lot of specific input from both sides, but there's also a lot of flexibility," concludes Inaba when asked how well the various teams have managed to fuse their distinct approaches. "We've had freedom to discuss the story elements based on what we want from the design, for example, and vice versa; there's a lot of interaction."

"When we're working with Kojima Productions, I've noticed that everyone says their opinions," says Saito. "Everyone butts heads and makes sure their voices are heard. That's one thing we definitely have at Platinum Games as well, and that's shown through in our relationship." He smiles. "We hope ultimately that you can see that tension in the game." ■

Q&A
Yuji Korekado
Creative producer, Kojima Productions



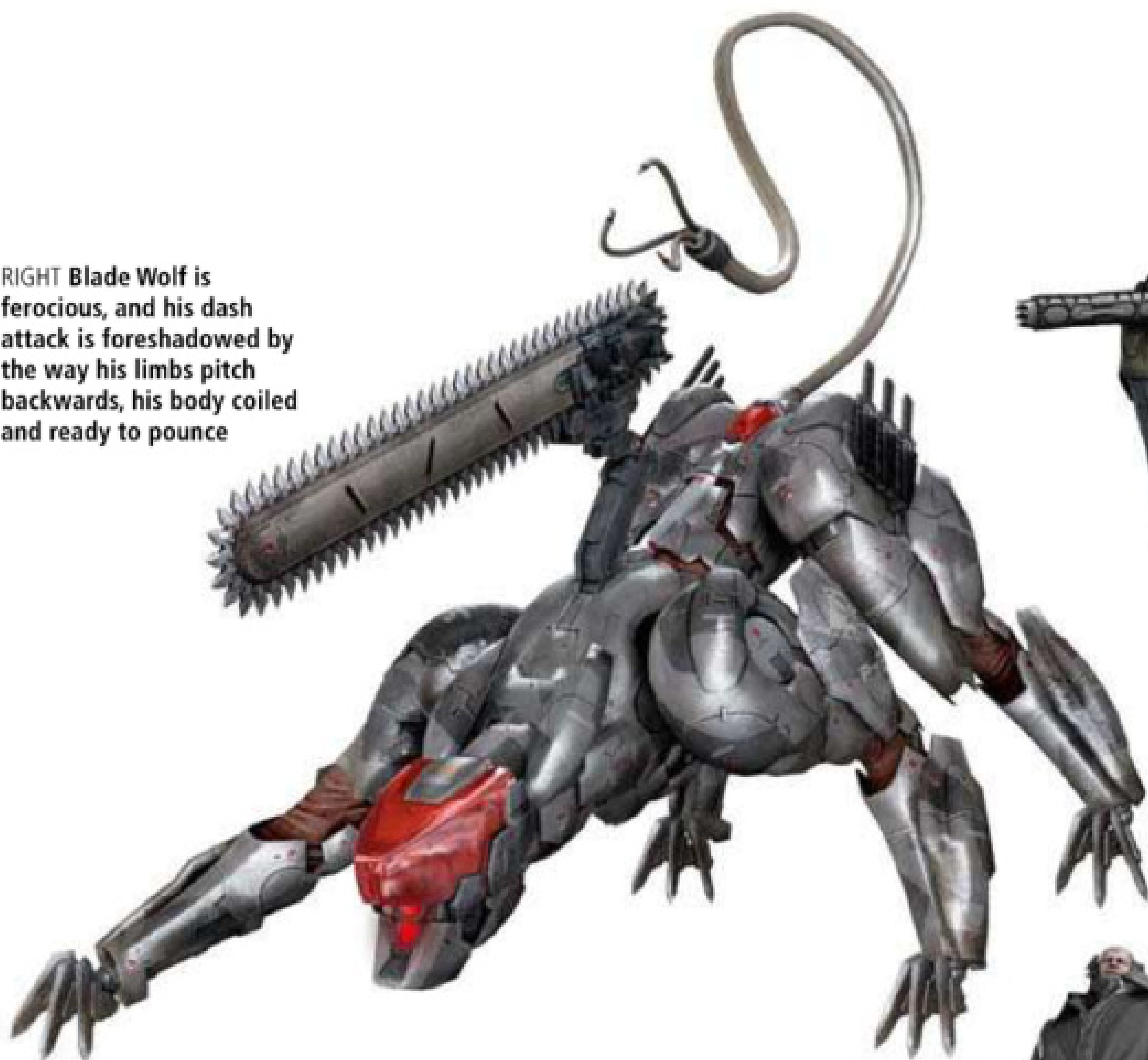
How are you handling making *Metal Gear Rising* across two separate teams?
When we first started development internally, it didn't go as smoothly as we thought it would. The big move came when we decided to have Platinum develop for us. Another one was having them responsible for all the game design, and not having us being responsible for it – just looking over it... That was a big step for the game being reborn.

At Kojima Productions, we feel we're very good at storytelling, story writing, cutscene direction and the *Metal Gear* world view. The timeline and environment of *MGS*, that's something we're in charge of, and the game design is Platinum Games', and that synchronisation was the biggest step we took. From the outside, if you were looking at us, you'd realise we're working as one big team, though. We throw opinions at each other, talk about our differences, and we build something even better.

When the time period of *Rising* shifted from between *MGS2* and *MGS4* to after *MGS4*, did thematic elements of the game remain consistent?
Raiden's will is a big part of the story of *Revengeance*, and that was a part of the original story, but there were a lot of changes as well. A big aspect of the game that we wanted to focus on was cutting. Not just in the game design but in the story – to feature cutting as a storytelling element. When Raiden was Jack The Ripper, when he was an adolescent, he cut a lot of enemies, but also a lot of Liberians who weren't really enemies at all. In *Revengeance*, what's happened is that he cuts out of will. He uses what he calls the 'sword of justice'. He uses it as a tool for justice, but he begins to question whether it really is justice as the story unfolds.

Have you had to change your approach to storytelling to match a game with a faster pace than normal?
For *Revengeance*, with the action sequences in mind, we started to make the cutscenes a lot shorter. It's not necessarily about losing the depth as such. It's more about removing the dialogue that wasn't actually needed for the story to move forward, and blending it with the action, so that the fast pace of the action and the environment lives within those scenes. Not everything is told in words. Everything is still told, but – be it dialogue or action – we wanted to use a lot more action as storytelling and a lot more storytelling when the action's in the player's hands.

RIGHT **Blade Wolf is ferocious, and his dash attack is foreshadowed by the way his limbs pitch backwards, his body coiled and ready to pounce**





LEFT **Sam is Raiden's main rival, his easy charm belying a dark sensibility. He's large, but he's graceful with it.**
BELOW-LEFT **Another blade master cyborg, Sundowner wields a HF sword called Bloodlust. Is he the true leader of Desperado?**



Design showcase

Platinum Games may have scrapped Kojima Productions' bosses, but the team has added its own set that truly seem to belong to the world of *MGS*





FAR RIGHT **Monsoon seems like the perfect foil for a hero who can slice people to ribbons. He's a cyborg ninja who's already been divided up into segments.**
RIGHT **Mistral's arms can detach and attack the player in the form of *MGS4*'s Dwarf Gekkos. Her silhouette hints at Hindu deities, while her backing track curiously invokes heavy metal.**
LEFT **Raiden's haunted yet determined in this game, his years of abuse lending him a stoic air. Yoji Shinkawa's designs are as lithe as ever, as these busts demonstrate**



H | Y
P | E

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

Agent 47 proves that he's still the smartest man in the room

Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	IO Interactive
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Denmark
Release	November 20

Hitman: Absolution **confronts Agent 47 with a series of personal dilemmas, including being contracted to assassinate his former ICA handler Diana Burnwood**



ABOVE **Though the game tells much of its story through cutscenes, staying in hiding and eavesdropping on conversations adds a tremendous amount of tension and narrative colour**

When somebody opens the bathroom door oblivious to the fact you're inside, it's an awkward moment. But when you're wearing a police disguise, crouching and visibly clutching a large carving knife, it's that bit more awkward.

This is the predicament we find ourselves in during a recent hands-on with *Hitman: Absolution*. We've just narrowly eluded a pursuing helicopter by leaping between rooftops and ducking into a derelict building, which it transpires belongs to a commune of cannabis-growing hippies. The poor guy who's found us crouching in the bathroom could well be strung out on drugs, but his response still jars us from our stealth-game reverie. We expect him to alert the cops, who are combing the compound in search of a killer. Instead, he just stands in the doorway staring at us blankly, and then casually remarks to nobody in particular, "There's something creepy about him."

When we realise he poses no threat, we push him aside and renew our search for the lift that will get us to the ground-floor exit. Oddly, the cops' focus on locating Agent 47 doesn't seem to be at all distracted by the fact that one of the rooms in the building contains a forest of cannabis plants, and we're talking Nebraska cornfield proportions here.

In fact, these sorts of immersion-breaking hiccups occur with dispiriting frequency over the course of our time with *Absolution*. To cite another example, a patrolling goon in a different stage enters the room we're in, flushing us frantically into cover. Moments earlier, we'd strangled a handful of his buddies and stashed their bodies in a closet.

Well, two out of three bodies, anyway. Our clean-up job was interrupted when this new visitor arrived. If he'd taken another step into the room, he would've tripped over the corpse

He stood in the doorway staring, then said, "There's something creepy about him"

lying sprawled out at his feet. But he just lingers there for maybe 30 seconds, the deceased right under his nose, and then wanders off to rejoin his pathfinding loop. Who hired these clueless rent-a-thugs anyway? Maybe on a higher difficulty setting the jig would have been up. Who knows?

The aforementioned flaws only stand out because the world that IO has created exudes so much intelligence and believability elsewhere. Even though videogames have



HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

RIGHT **If you stay behind cover long enough, there's a good chance even the most tenacious pursuing guards will lose your scent and wander off. If not, violence may be your only option**



staged sequences across countless mansions, libraries, train terminals and strip clubs, the versions of such places that we encounter over the course of our roughly three-hour-long *Absolution* campaign demo feel vivid and comprehensively imagined. The closer you get to achieving a benchmark of uncompromising realism, the more subtle aberrations tend to stand out from the canvas.

Speaking of train stations and strip clubs, large-scale crowd sequences prove a particular highlight of our demo, offering a dynamic sense of pacing and contrast. After crawling through cramped corridors and isolating targets in otherwise empty rooms, a bustling crowd scene breaks up the monotony in the

How do you perform a hit when there are hundreds of potential eyewitnesses?

same way that an explosive set-piece would in an action game. *Absolution* opens up in scope at just the right moments, forcing you to adapt. How do you perform a hit when there are hundreds of potential eyewitnesses?



Even entering a building in *Absolution* is seldom straightforward, since there are a variety of entry points available. But using disguises still helps you to reduce the level of suspicion you'll raise in hostile characters

The first challenge involves keeping track of your target in such a busy space. Hitting the right bumper takes you into *Absolution*'s Instinct mode, casting potentially hostile figures in yellow. Your target will have a crosshair symbol floating above their head. This enables you to track their movements and wait for the right time to strike.

The mission doesn't end when you take down your target, however. You still have to reach the level's exit undetected. When you take down anybody in *Absolution*, the game offers you several button prompts onscreen. One lets you assume their clothing as a disguise. Another enables you to begin dragging the body, so that you can take it to a receptacle where it can be safely disposed of. And sometimes there will be a sewer or a cliff side nearby, which means getting rid of an incriminating corpse is just a matter of rolling it over the edge with your foot.

Some of our demo's most enjoyable moments involve using creative diversions to pass through a given area undetected. Occasionally, it's as simple as crouching in cover and tossing a wrench or bottle into a nearby rubbish bin to lure a guard away from his post. But passing through a Chinatown convenience store requires a more involved strategy. We take out a cook in a back room, don his white apron and hat, then seal off the fire sprinkler valve. Then we set off fireworks in the front lobby of the store, creating a haze of smoke that lets us slip out unnoticed.

In these moments, *Hitman: Absolution* feels more like a really tense adventure game than anything else. So what if some of the characters act a bit dim occasionally? As long as the game creates compelling ways to make you feel like the smartest guy in the room, it'll be the follow-up Agent 47 deserves. ■



Lady killer


Despite the furore around the controversial 'sexy nun' trailer, *Hitman: Absolution* is surprisingly empathetic in its portrayal of female characters. Even the dancers in its Vixen Club strip joint are well-rounded, and we don't mean that as a pun. Upstairs, away from the poles and the leering crowds, we eavesdrop from cover as one of the new girls frets over her employer sending her to Hawaii to "entertain" some friends of his at a private club. She fights back the tears as her fellow dancers commiserate her and offer advice on staying safe. This moment adds depth to *Absolution*'s fiction.

H | Y
P | E

FORTNITE

Unreal Engine 4's debut emphasises the power of player choice

Publisher	Epic Games
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2013



Influenced by Pixar movies and Looney Tunes cartoons, *Fortnite*'s stylised art direction is a good barometer for the tone that Epic's post-apocalyptic game is aiming towards



FORTNITE



Bleszinski promises the combat will live up to Epic's pedigree, but it's possible to avoid if that better suits your gameplay style. You could focus on building or exploring instead



Running in Unreal Engine 4, *Fortnite* shines on a level not far removed from a CG film; it will also scale down to accommodate less powerful computers

What goes bump in the night? In Epic's world, grisly snarls are usually attributable to Lancer teeth chewing through beefy aliens. Yet as scary as being blindsided by a Mauler can be, *Gears Of War*'s scripted encounters have favoured choreographed spectacle over dynamic surprises. Now the studio's approach is changing as it shifts its focus to its next-generation engine technology.

The first game to use the formidable Unreal Engine 4 is *Fortnite*, which seems to have more in common with *Minecraft* than a typical *Gears* experience. Where Sera's mythos has traditionally demanded a singleplayer approach, *Fortnite* is built from the ground up as co-op experience. Instead of being funnelled through combat bowls and setpieces, it will set you free with other players online. While nights will see you struggling to survive, by day you're able to explore and scavenge what you need from its vast open-world environment. You can also build and defend structures, or even outright battle the game's resident ghoulies.

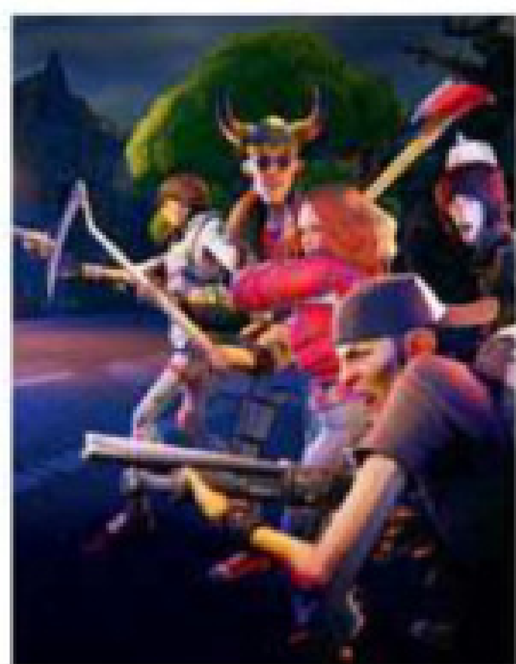
"These days, it seems like game genres are so specific," explains producer **Tanya Jessen**. "So for us, *Fortnite* was, as a starting point, about [asking], 'How can we get lots of different types of people playing together?'"

In step with its more accessible feel, *Fortnite* isn't visually echoing *Gears*' violent intensity. Its stylised characters and screen-popping palette more closely resemble a Pixar film, albeit one perhaps subtly influenced by Tim Burton and Henry Selick, as opposed to the hulking, weighty art direction Epic has long been associated with. For a game with so much replay potential, it was important to keep the aesthetic light reveals former Epic design director **Cliff Bleszinski**. "The Road was a fun book to read or a fun movie to see for two hours, but we're hoping people will spend dozens, if not hundreds, if not more, hours in this world," he says. "You want people walking away going, 'That was bright and colourful and fun,' as opposed to, 'I'm going to go slit my wrists now!'"

"Fortnite was about 'How can we get lots of different types of people playing together?'"

But the real driving force behind *Fortnite* (as well as the dynamically spawning combat encounters in the upcoming *Gears Of War: Judgment*) is what Epic is calling 'play your way', the studio's tagline for a newfound focus on emergent gameplay. *Fortnite*'s being called 'co-operative sandbox survival', and the opportunities to apply Epic's new design philosophy are myriad. Its Americana-with-zombies world is mostly procedurally generated, for instance, and Bleszinski has revealed the team is still working out the balance between artistic touches and random content generation. We do know, however, that the monster types that roam the map will change night by night to keep you guessing.

How you choose to deal with the day/night cycle is open-ended. Like scavenging for loot? Feel free to spend the day gathering materials to build a stronghold – which you can construct and edit on the fly – as long as you're home before dusk falls. If you want to scout ahead to, say, investigate the safety of a nearby building, you can do that, too. If you just feel like busting skulls, you can wait for around for everyone else to build up your



Makeshift marvels

Epic hasn't shown off much of the weaponry of *Fortnite* yet, but it has provided a glimpse of how upgrade choices for your arsenal can be tailored to suit different playstyles. Using a simple one-bolt crossbow as an example, this base weapon could be modified into a three-bolt triple-shot weapon for ammo scavengers; take an electrified bolt to temporarily stun enemies, which could play into your strategy; or be loaded with a grappling-hook-style tightrope for traversing unexplored buildings or scouting for enemies. What you choose to do is up to you, which should mesh together with the open-ended world and role choices to great effect.

Keep an eye on the sun: as dusk settles, enemies of all sorts (such as the flea-like Troll) crop up en masse, and if you're unprepared the attack could be disastrous

defences and then unleash a makeshift arsenal on any monsters that try to ruin your night. Offence, defence and support all have their roles to play, and like any good team effort, you've got to stick together.

Still, surviving till daybreak may be easier said than done. While Husks, the standard enemy, rely on strength of numbers, different creature types mean fortresses will need to grow ever more elaborate to withstand attack. For instance, you'll have to account for Trolls, vermin-esque shadow critters that have relatively low health, but will steal your items. More unnervingly, they can also pass through any dark space, from underneath floors to through walls.

Meanwhile, how easily a shelter gets knocked down is dependent on the breadth and sturdiness of your construction. Over time, players will gain access to more sophisticated architectural pieces, such as staircases, windows, pillars and railings, to help reenforce their hodgepodge homes.

Other questions remain unanswered: how does combat work? What about gameplay balance? One thing Bleszinski has made clear is that Epic's first Unreal Engine 4 game is currently a PC exclusive, and a "living project" that will be continuously supported post launch, completely scalable from low- to high-end computers.

"Everyone asks, 'When's next-gen, when's next-gen?' It's one of those things – next-gen is here," he says. "Next-gen is a high-end PC. This is Epic's DNA, going all the way back to *Unreal Tournament* and beyond. And when I sit down at my desk with my keyboard and my mouse, it feels like I'm visiting with an old friend, and it feels new again." ■

H|Y
P|E

EPIC MICKEY 2: THE POWER OF TWO

The artsy mouse is back in a world with a greater sense of involvement

Publisher	Disney
Developer	Junction Point
Format	360, PS3, Wii, Wii U
Origin	US
Release	November 18 (US), 23 (EU), 30 (Wii U)



Like most *Epic Mickey* villains, the dragon can be painted or thinned. It's up to you to decide whether to remove his solid portions or work on restoring segments that have been corrupted



DISNEY EPIC MICKEY 2: THE POWER OF TWO



The Shadow Blot might have been defeated in the first game, but his minions return for this sequel. This foul creature puts up a stiff fight, requiring brushwork and other powers to defeat

When we first played *Epic Mickey 2* in **E**241, we tested out its co-op mechanic, taking on Mickey's long-forgotten precursor, Oswald, in order to solve puzzles alongside the mouse. Junction Point resurrected the rabbit as an anti-hero in the previous game, although he experienced a change of heart later on. The pair of heroes are reunited in *Epic Mickey 2*, but while they may share similarities, Oswald doesn't get a brush. Instead, he's able to bring the Cartoon Wasteland's clapped-out contraptions back to sparking life with the aid of a magical remote control – a neat way to avoid co-op conflicts over whether the paint or thinner should be used to solve problems.

This time round, we play as Mickey, letting the AI control Oswald. For the most part he's passive, following quietly behind us while we explore the Western-themed Disney Gulch. He's always on hand when a machine needs zapping, however, or when he and Mickey need to link up for a *Banjo-Kazooie*-style joined-up floaty jump. In short, Junction Point has made an AI partner who isn't a burden, while allowing for the combination of his and Mickey's powers to make for more complex puzzles.

Disney Gulch itself reflects the series' patchwork art style, a mixture of old cartoons and ramshackle attractions that capture that vintage Disney charm. We're playing on PS3, and while *Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two* may be a Wii game at heart, given the paint and thinner mechanic was made for the Wii Remote, Junction Point's bright, cartoony art style is at its vibrant best on a HD display. These are cartoon characters, after all, and as such benefit from the PS3 and 360's extra clarity. The recently announced Wii U version could well offer both, and GamePad users will also receive a map on the touchscreen.

The Gulch serves to highlight how Junction Point has made good on its promise to offer a greater sense of consequence to your actions by affecting the surrounding environment. A river bisects the Gulch, running through the centre of the valley. Use lots of paint in order to solve the level's puzzles and deal with its enemies – painted enemies can become temporary allies – and the river turns a beautiful bright blue. Rely on thinner in order to, say, remove the last vestiges of a ramshackle bar from the corner of the map, and the river turns into the corrosive stuff itself. It's a simple change, but one with a tangible effect on the Gulch's mood. And whereas the original game would see environments return to a neutral state once you left the area, levels will continue to bear the evidence of your involvement for the duration of *Epic Mickey 2* – unless you choose to go back yourself and fix things the hard way, of course.

It's a surprisingly unsettling level, with giant sinister clown heads jutting from walls

Water features aside, the Gulch offers the same blend of simple platforming and basic puzzle solving we're used to from *Epic Mickey* as we explore the surrounding environment in order to find power supplies for a broken-down train. Once we're all aboard, we're whisked to our first boss encounter, a fight against a dragon that's ensconced at the centre of a doughnut-shaped platform. Our foe's reminiscent of *Super Mario Galaxy 2*'s Gobblegut, with his bulbous features and fiery attacks. After we thin this imposter to oblivion, our next stop is the Floatyard, a dark and twisted theme park in disrepair, which recaptures the feel of the creepy concept that Junction Point used to introduce the series.

It's a surprisingly unsettling level for a Disney title, with giant sinister clown heads jutting awkwardly from walls, but the nature of game is unchanged. The residents of this distorted corner of the Cartoon Wasteland still have problems that only the magic brush can solve, and the solution still involves some basic combat followed by pointing the cursor at an object and deciding whether paint or thinner takes your fancy. This isn't a problem, of course – the platforming is improved and the camera better behaved – but it does highlight how the finished game will need build on the sense of longterm consequence in its world to convince players of the impact of the choices it's constantly inviting them to make. We hope it does, because in the Cartoon Wasteland Junction Point has crafted a world that pays tribute to Disney's heritage while containing a life of its own. ■



All-singing, all-talking

As well as featuring classic Disney-style musical numbers, *Disney Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two* is fully voice acted. Mickey's official voice actor, former greetings card illustrator Bret Iwan, is supplying the squeaky tones, while Oswald is gaining a voice for the first time. The impact is perhaps more noticeable on secondary characters, however. In the first game, everyone spoke in garbled squeaks and mumbles. As a compromise between Disney's silent movie past and fully voiced present, it worked, but the voice acting in *Epic Mickey 2* brings more life to the Cartoon Wasteland's inhabitants.

HYPE

THE MIGHTY QUEST FOR EPIC LOOT

Hark! A free-to-play dungeon crawler with new ideas

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	In-house (Montreal)
Format	PC
Origin	Canada
Release	2013



The user-generated content revolution is about to breach the gate of the fantasy hack-and-slash genre. In *The Mighty Quest For Epic Loot*, Ubisoft Montreal forays into the free-to-play online space, while players will divide their time between building their own custom castle and mounting assaults on those assembled by others. Almost everything about *Mighty Quest* – its unfussy user interface, cartoon art style and genre-parodying sense of humour – feels utterly embraceable.

"We wanted to have a really light tone and make something that everybody can enjoy," says the game's creative director, **Arnald Jamin**. "A game such as *Diablo* looks great, but it's really dark and it's not for everyone. I won't see my little niece or my father playing that game. It's too bloody and it's too dark. We wanted to have a lighter tone and we wanted to have humour."

The *Diablo* comparison may be obvious, given the emphasis on dungeon-crawling and loot hoarding, but *Mighty Quest* finds inspiration in other, less likely, places. The monsters you place in your castle can be periodically harvested for gold. And they also make money while you're not in the game, just like 'waiting games' such as NimbleBit's *Tiny Tower*.

The most enviable pieces of loot in the game can't be bought with paid-for currency. You'll have to grind for those spoils instead

The build-attack hybrid gameplay takes the level creation aspect of the game and makes it a core piece of the experience, as opposed to being a sideshow feature that only a narrow subset of players will ever touch. What's more, it ensures a stream of fresh challenges as devious minds conjure new gauntlets to overcome. *Mighty Quest* doesn't ask you to raise your hand and announce 'I'm creative!' by clicking on a level editor menu prompt. Like *Minecraft* or *SimCity*, it just presupposes you are and gets on with the fun.

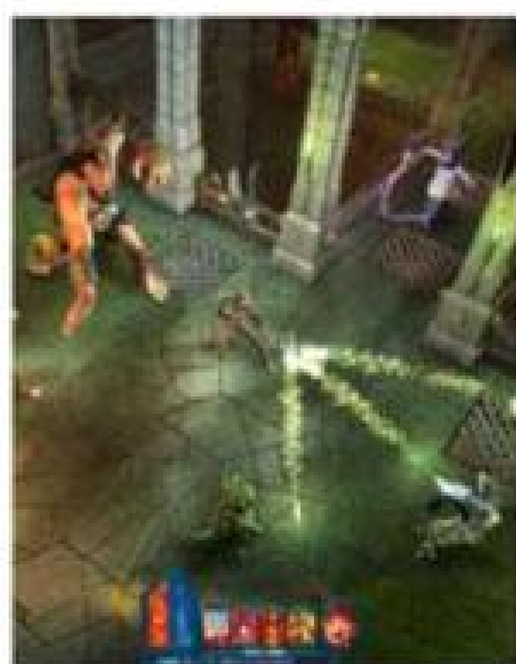
The castle-building editor embodies this charm by bringing the building process to life in various subtle ways. When you drag a monster – a Snotter, perhaps – from the left-hand menu into a given room of your castle, it plunks into the scene and springs to life immediately. Your monsters feel like pets in this way, and they'll attack invading players just like a pitbull going after a postman.

As well as monsters, you can also purchase an array of traps to set around your castle, such as statues that spin around belching flames at timed intervals, or a hamster running in a spike-lined wheel that rolls back and forth along a track. To keep the game balanced, there are limits on the number of defence points that can be spent in given zones. This ensures the craftiest – not simply the richest – player prevails. Moving sections of your citadel around is as simple as dragging pieces and watching them slot together like giant Lego blocks.

When you're happy with your interior decorating, it's time to take the fight to other castles in attack mode. Pick a hero from the standard classes – knight, archer, et al – and go crush some forts. Who knows, maybe you'll even pick up some ideas on how to tweak the arrangement of monsters and obstacles in your base? The objective is to fight your way to the throne room, behind which a store of treasures awaits your conquest. The harder the challenge, the better the loot you'll win. Some of the castles will be built by Ubisoft, while others will be highly rated efforts made by the community.

The game is optimised for short play sessions. "We didn't want to have a game like *League Of Legends*, where you have to play for 30 minutes," says Jamin. "We wanted the player to feel like they could enter the game any time they wanted and be able to play at different moments in the day." Although the game will launch next year on PC, running from a modest-sized 130MB client, the team is well aware of how suited it is for tablets.

"We are looking at porting the game to the iPad," says Jamin, "because it really suits the touch interface. Casting your spell is as simple as choosing it and choosing the place where you want to cast it. The building aspect will be really easy, pinching to zoom in and out, dragging furniture into your castle." The team is investigating a console release as well, but nothing's confirmed yet.



Bet you can't

To give the game a more social feel, *Mighty Quest* enables you to send personalised challenges to friends via Facebook. Maybe you'll bet your friend your castle will be able to kill more heroes than their castle during one day. Or you choose a level for you and your friend to play. If you both beat it, you go to another round until somebody wins and the other loses. Players are invited to set their own challenge parameters – the duration, the amounts of money, and suchlike. The asynchronous competition sounds promising, with you able to play against an opponent's ghost or watch a replay of their playthrough.

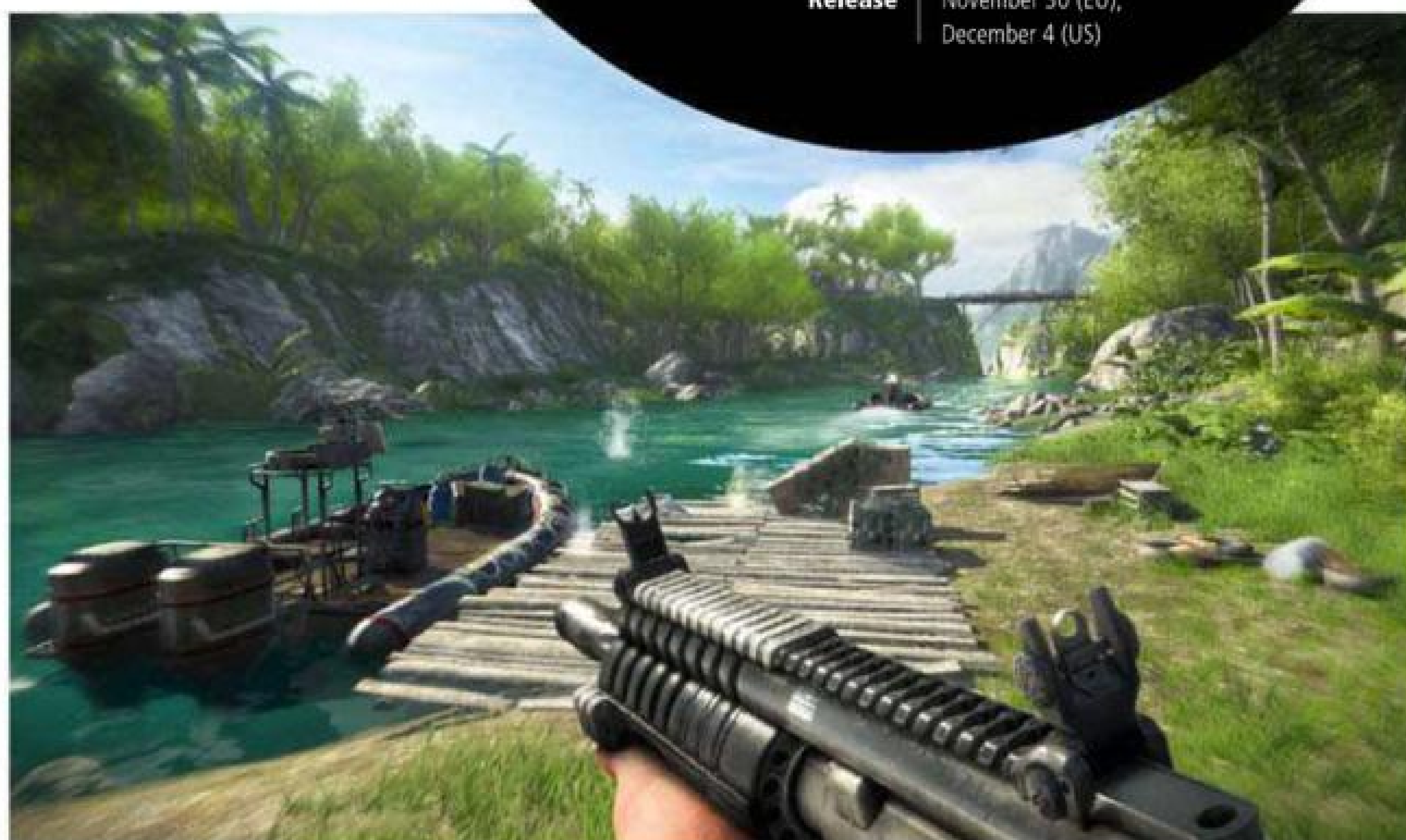


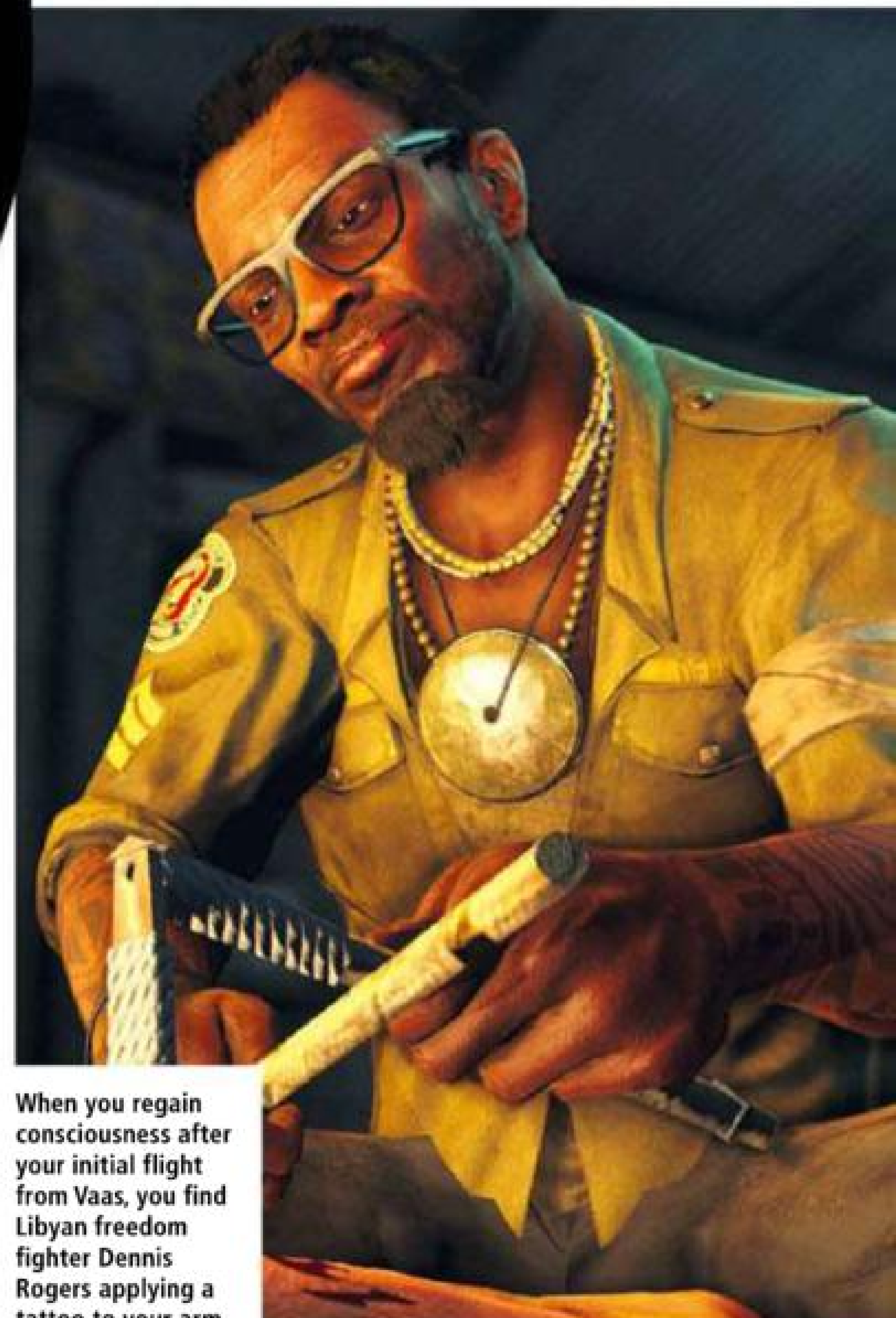
HYPE

FAR CRY 3

The open-world shooter that's full of heart and darkness

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	In-house (Montreal)
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Canada
Release	November 30 (EU), December 4 (US)





When you regain consciousness after your initial flight from Vaas, you find Libyan freedom fighter Dennis Rogers applying a tattoo to your arm



ABOVE **You can find boats at various docks that allow you to travel down rivers and between islands in the archipelago.** RIGHT **Restoring power to radio towers across the island will illuminate surrounding points of interest on your map, much like view points in the *Assassin's Creed* series**

Dynamic fire was one of the most memorable features of *Far Cry 2*, and it's back for an encore in *Far Cry 3*

When Ubisoft Montreal announced *Far Cry 3* at E3 2011, the game's themes of violence, survival and insanity were broadcast loudly and with little nuance. In the reveal demo, the unhinged Vaas, leader of a band of pirates, spits a string of f-bombs into the camera at close range. He then quizzes the game's hero, Jason Brody, on the definition of insanity before shoving him into a pool of water far below with a large stone tied around his ankles.

After a narrow escape, Brody creeps up on a guard, snatches the knife from his belt and plunges it into the guy's chest, before flinging it into another pirate's throat. This string of events felt like a calculated attempt to be hardcore. Had the endearingly cerebral sharp corners of *Far Cry 2* been sanded down in a bid to be more commercially viable?

A recent two-hour hands-on with the game proved reassuring on this score. We were able to start at the very beginning of the story. What we found was a game capable of remarkable narrative subtlety and emotional range in its performances. You may have already heard about the dynamic behaviour of the island's wildlife and the seamless open-world setting that's waiting to be explored. We're going to set aside those aspects here to focus on *Far Cry 3*'s storytelling and character performances.

The game opens with MIA's stoner party anthem Paper Planes thumping from the speakers, accompanying a quick-cut montage of scenes of Ibiza-style hedonism. A group of friends, all reminiscent of Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue models, toss back shots in a nightclub. They horse around on a beach, pilot jet skis across glittering blue waters, and skydive over stunning tropical vistas.

Just as you start to sync with the group's euphoria, the good-times montage crashes to a chilling halt. Vaas pauses the seized camcorder. Jason and his older brother Grant sit across from one another in a cage, bound like captive animals. We discover that the friends' skydiving trip got significantly more perilous the second they touched down on the island. There's no sign of the other members of Jason's group, and you have no idea where they've been taken, or if they're even alive. It's a bracing scene and one that establishes a deadly seriousness to the game's rising action.

"I think it would've been easy to be zany and try to out-insanity everybody," explains lead producer **Dan Hay**, "and that's not what we did. We knew we wanted subtle and nuanced performances. We knew we wanted real emotion. The goal wasn't to make it crazy; the goal was to make it insane. And the difference is that crazy can be gratuitous, but insanity sometimes has a plan. We wanted the story to be credible."

The acting performances to which Hay refers are an important facet of *Far Cry 3*. After all, it doesn't matter how well written your script is or how engaging the scenarios are if your actors don't make the characters believable. Your actions in *Far Cry 3*'s open world feel more consequential because, on an emotional level, you feel there's something meaningful at stake.

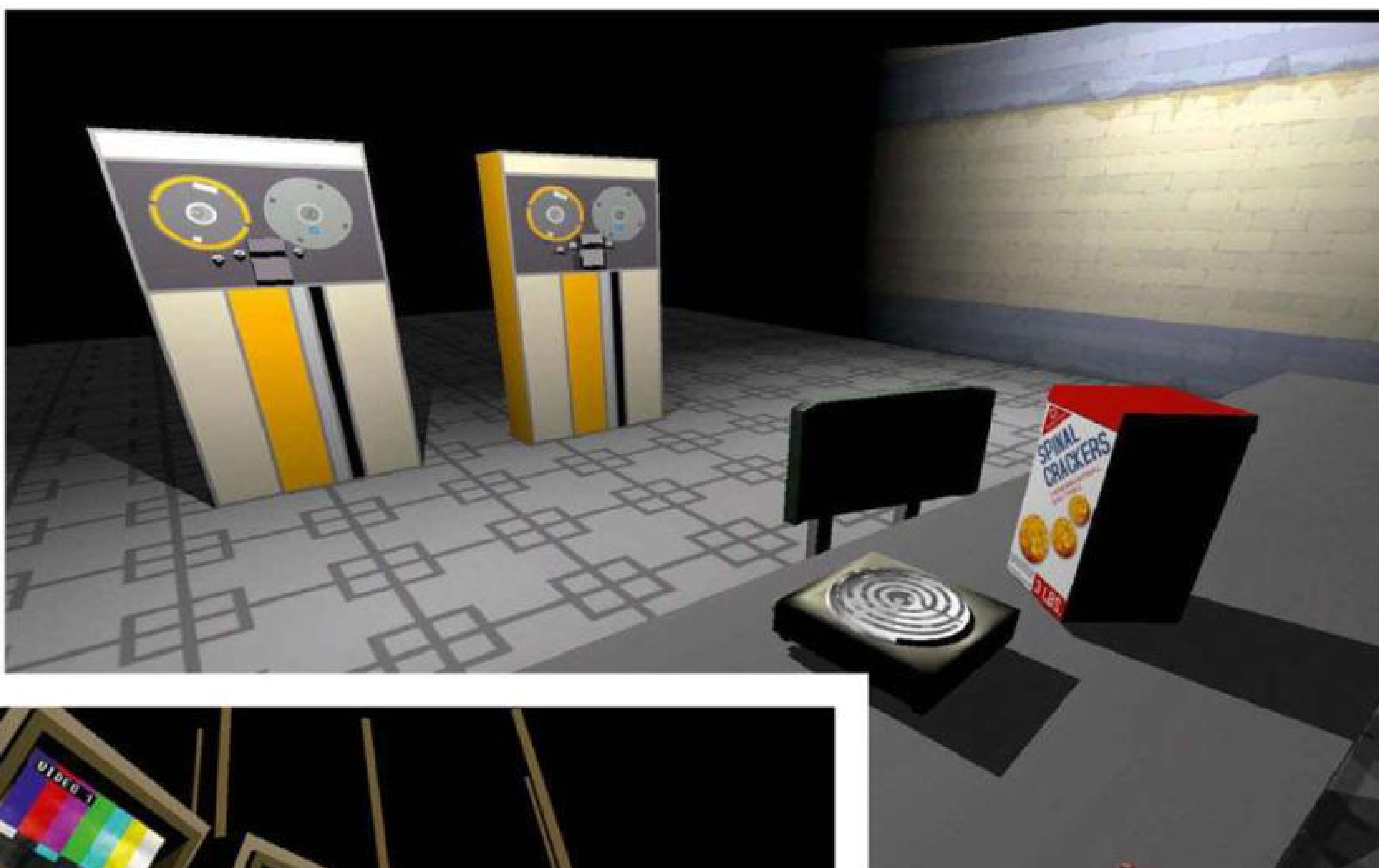
When Jason finally locates his friend Daisy, she's severely ill and in the care of a clammy, sketchy-looking man named Dr Earnhardt. This shroom-addled doctor could easily be played for laughs, but you sense he's self-medicating against some overwhelming loss. The most promising thing about *Far Cry 3* is that it doesn't settle for just giving you an open world to explore, it's ambitious enough to offer some compelling inner ones as well. ■



Getting perspective

The creators of *Far Cry 3* want players to live the emotional journey of protagonist Jason Brody, a young man forced to learn hard lessons about the darker corners of human nature. The game's firstperson perspective enhances the connection between you and Brody. This is about immersion, not just observing events from the safety of the cheap seats. "I think that firstperson is a real benefit for this," says lead producer Dan Hay. "You're in [Brody's] skin… When Vaas stands too close and treats you like a piece of meat, you feel the weight of his presence and like you need to back away. You're completely immersed in it."

RIGHT **The game's simple-shaded aesthetic fits well with its 1980s technological premise**



BELOW **The secret hacker lair is your hub for picking missions before then diving into virtual reality simulations to do them**





H Y P E

QUADRILATERAL COWBOY

Blendo's cyberpunk game wants to hack its way into our hearts

Publisher	Blendo Games
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2013

Your deck is the alpha and omega of world interaction, allowing you to access objects like robots able to photograph documents in places that would normally be inaccessible

The decade is the 1980s, and we've just connected to Telnet over a blazingly fast 56.6k connection. We're already inside the VR simulator, casing the outside of a security-alarmed building for a job. It's a job that our client will soon pull using the resulting, and hopefully well-laid, plans.

We hit F1 to enter Noclip mode, allowing easy, free-floating inspection of the target's entire architectural floor plan. The job is dangerous and highly illegal, but armed with our deck and master hacking skills, we might as well be ghosts. Today, our objective is relatively straightforward. All we need to do is break in, photograph some contracts for our client and get out without being caught. It's time to get to work.

If you're a fan of cyberpunk, this scenario from Blendo Games' *Quadrilateral Cowboy* will be at least partially familiar. Developed as a counterpoint to the dumbed-down hacking distractions commonly used in games, playing *Quadrilateral Cowboy* is like stepping into a lo-fi William Gibson sim. Opening a window or turning off a CCTV security camera takes more than solving a simple numerical puzzle. To hack an object, you'll need to throw down in the VR world your deck (a suitcase-bound laptop, instantly recognisable to Neuromancer fans) and enter commands in its OS to temporarily manipulate various objects that stand between you and your goal. But how exactly does running a virtual approximation of DOS make for interesting gameplay?

Playing Quadrilateral Cowboy is like stepping into a lo-fi William Gibson sim

Though your deck grants some measure of god-like power over your environment – attentive players will probably notice the metagame parallel to PC console commands working under the hood – success in *Quadrilateral Cowboy*'s timed missions is down to constructing a watertight plan in VR, before handing it over to your clients so they can execute it in real life. Putting together a command line that sequentially creates an entrance, turns off alarm systems and opens an exit is one half of your duty. The other is ensuring in VR that the timing for each action occurs with enough leeway for you – and later, your client – to slip through the building before any given system resets.

Herein lies a complication: everything must be done within intervals of three seconds. It's a threshold number you can't cross without causing a security breach, and this is accounted for in the commands.

Say you want to turn off a laser guarding a doorway. Well, its sensor is conveniently labelled as 'laser8' in the game world, while the door is 'door2' (interactive objects display their command filename to show players which items to target). Thus the command line to deactivate the laser and open the door is 'laser8.off(3); door2.open(3)' with '3' equalling the amount of seconds each command will stay in effect.

Depending on your physical position, you may need timed delays between commands, and as the already open-ended levels get more complex, it's easy to see the potential for brain bending puzzles. As in real coding, command syntax must be perfect, but the gratification when you're fluidly controlling in-game objects by entering lines of text is just as heady. Finally, the myth of the Hollywood hacker has met its match. ■



Corporate espionage

While *Quadrilateral Cowboy*'s training mission (described above) is a fairly basic smash-and-grab affair, we were able to see a little more of what's in store for players later on. One mission employs a Weevil, a small remote-controlled robot with flea-like hopping abilities that's hooked up to a CCTV monitor. This handy device can access remote areas if directed correctly via distance and turning-radius commands. Another mission requires a single long command line in order to complete a job in under a minute. Then there are gadgets like the Caser, a retractable sentry gun, which seems like a promising tool of the trade.



YAKUZA 5

Publisher Sega | **Developer** In-house (Yakuza Studio) | **Format** PS3 | **Origin** Japan | **Release** 6 December (Japan), TBA (Europe)



The sweeping soap opera of street soldiers and smackdowns continues with multiples of five – five characters, five key locations – and well over 100 minigame distractions to feast on. Bear hunting in the snow, dance-offs and the most over-the-top combat in the series thus far: *Yakuza 5* looks set to push the series further in the direction of slapstick humour, away from its roots in noirish urban crime. But, with a working *Virtua Fighter 2* arcade cabinet promised to be tucked away in the game, at last, we won't complain. Kazuma Kiryu's tug-of-war with Tokyo's streetlife is becoming one of gaming's most prolific, and riveting, sagas.

SURVARIUM

Publisher Vostok Games | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** Ukraine | **Release** 2013



Just as it's popularly believed that wildlife has flourished in the exclusion zone surrounding Chernobyl in the wake of disaster, so too do games inspired by it. The spirit of *STALKER 2* lives in this first title from Vostok Games, a studio comprising members of the *STALKER* dev team. A free-to-play FPS with both co-operative and competitive components in its post-catastrophe setting, Survarium seems less exploratory and more action-focused than its spiritual ancestor.

THE SWINDLE

Publisher Size Five Games | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBA



A switch to the Unity engine, where the game has been rebuilt from scratch, has delayed Dan Marshall's steampunk crime thriller. It features a stunning, shadowy 2D art style in its depiction of a near-future Orwellian dictatorship, and promises to offer an open-ended approach to heists.

CALL OF JUAREZ: THE GUNSLINGER

Publisher Ubisoft | **Developer** Techland
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** Poland | **Release** TBA



After a critical drubbing for its attempt to transplant its old-west shooter into a modern setting, Techland has made a hasty retreat. *The Gunslinger* is a more conventional take on the wild west, following a narrator's flashbacks to when he fought against or alongside Billy The Kid, Butch Cassidy, et al.

WILDFIRE WORLDS

Publisher Dot Product | **Developer** In-house
Format iOS, PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBA



An inverted *Sim City*, *Wildfire Worlds* gives players a pre-built quasi-urban idyll and lets them wreck it, via angry little cardboard activists, who are dropped into the streets. More toy than game at the moment, Dot Product is working on turning its fascinating simulation into a more releasable form.

PROJECT ETERNITY

Publisher Obsidian Entertainment | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** US | **Release** TBA



After years of crafting intelligent sequels to other studios' games (and 2010's intriguing, flawed *Alpha Protocol*), Obsidian's Kickstarted fantasy RPG is a chance for the studio to build a world from scratch, without publisher input, and fill it with the richly written characters its games are known for.

BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

Publisher 505 Games | **Developer** Starbreeze
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** Sweden | **Release** Spring 2013



A big stylistic departure for Starbreeze, *Brothers* sees the studio exchanging sci-fi brutality for almost twee fantasy, and firstperson shooting for what seems to be thirdperson platforming. There's still a dark edge, though, in a story in which the titular siblings quest to save their ailing father.

FUSE

Publisher EA | **Developer** Insomniac Games
Format PC, PS3 | **Origin** US | **Release** TBA



Originally debuted as *Overstrike*, Insomniac's first multiplatform game has been rebranded. It's moved away from *Ratchet & Clank*'s cartooniness, towards a grittier aesthetic, but no doubt the studio's talent for imaginative and exuberant weaponry will enliven this co-op shooter.

0X10C

Publisher Mojang | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** Sweden | **Release** TBA



Test footage of Markus 'Notch' Persson's take on *Elite* shows that physics, motion and laser guns are all in place and functional, which means he can begin work on the game itself. A sci-fi sandbox in which players can walk around their ships as well as pilot them through the void of space, Persson's aim to cover everything, from an on-board programmable 16-bit computer to seamless ship-to-planet transitions, suggests a game of both massive scope and tiny detail.



www.bit.ly/UPlKcA
Read more previews online

THE BANNER SAGA

Publisher Stoic | **Developer** In-house | **Format** PC | **Origin** US | **Release** November



A tactical RPG from three former members of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*'s development team, now a newly formed independent, *The Banner Saga* aims to bolt BioWare-style conversation trees and dialogue onto mechanics more akin to *Final Fantasy Tactics*, with a hand-drawn art style that adds a flowing motion to the turn-based battles. Stoic promises its Viking-themed tale will be concerned with the journey of your entire caravan of adventurers, and has cited George RR Martin's A Song Of Ice And Fire fantasy series as one inspiration for a narrative concerned with feudal power-struggles and political intrigue.



COMMANDMENTS OF GAME DESIGN

Edge's ten rules to make all games better, along with those from some of the world's most creative developers



www.bit.ly/ReMOkT
Our original ten commandments

In 2003, we published our Ten Commandments of game design, a set of rules that we felt would universally improve videogames. Ranging from save states to control schemes, they outlined the preoccupations of both players and game designers in that specific period of history. "In another ten years, this list will look laughably obsolete," we said, hoping that by then technology and design practice would have left it in the distant past. Not quite, though many of those commandments do indeed look archaic today, with the game industry having rolled swiftly onwards. But that progress has also introduced new challenges to making great games.

And so here we revisit the list by presenting our Ten Commandments for today. Some echo those of 2003, and others concern issues that back then we couldn't have dreamed of. These rules prioritise play experience over the interests of business, because the end product – the spark of interaction between a game's systems and a player's actions – is what really matters. These commandments represent the sticking points in game design that, if conquered, will help videogames continue to become more fun, more accessible and more essential.

I

DON'T BREAK YOUR OWN RULES

Ever jumped at a normal-looking ledge only to slide off because you weren't meant to go that way, or faced enemies that were inexplicably invulnerable until the game decided they were ready to die? No fun, is it? Game worlds are built on a covenant of suspended belief. Game rules can be outlandish or even harsh, but if they're consistent they'll inspire us to truly care about the place we're in. Don't bend them.

II

CREATE, DON'T CLONE

The line might be fuzzy between cloning and evolving an idea, given the fact that to some extent every game is built on what has come before, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. If games are to continue steadily improving, it's every developer's responsibility to ensure that if it takes on existing designs, it makes them better – be it by honing them or adding new elements. Just copying doesn't cut it.

Daniel Cook
Chief creative officer, Spry Fox

Iterate towards a better game. Identify problems, build a system to solve those problems, and test [it] with players. And if it isn't an amazing experience, try again. I expect to build each major feature in my games at least three times.

Rami Ismail
Co-founder, Vlambeer

Thou shalt not invoke other games while formulating your design. Oftentimes, while designing a game, you'll have the urge to say something like, 'Let's use the inventory system from *Diablo II*,' or '[make them work] the way the weapons work in *Cave Story*.' Those designs were made for those specific games, and trying to avoid mentioning other games or rephrasing ideas without such references will help you consider and ultimately achieve a design that's a perfect fit for your game.

III

FREE-TO-PLAY IS JUST A TOOL

No one can sensibly question the potential of free-to-play, just as no developer can sensibly say it specifically makes free-to-play games. After all, it's a business model, not a genre, and thinking otherwise endangers gaming with the possibility that monetisation will get in the way of satisfying design. And whether you're a player, a developer or an investor, that will never do.

IV

STOP PERVING

Let's be clear here: sex in games is fine. There's nothing wrong with representing flesh, passion and procreation. But there's a difference between sexy and leery, and games too often stray into the murk of the latter. Continuing to so commonly present women as objects to be ogled is just the thing to alienate half of our potential audience, and keep gaming lodged in a long, doleful adolescence.

V

INVEST IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Games today look prettier than ever, but are their inhabitants smarter? Do they make the kind of mistakes and feints that create interesting friends or challenging foes? AI is a vital interface between players and the cold calculation of a computer, and the idiocy of AI behaviour only looks sillier as visual fidelity increases. Whether it's through R&D or raising processing resources, make AI better.

Antti Ilvessuo

Creative director, RedLynx

Give players freedom. Even in a 2D world of bikes, there are a thousand different ways to pass a set of obstacles. Even in the smallest grid (where, for example, you might be connecting diamonds, there is freedom). You don't need to be in a 1,000 square kilometre area to give the player freedom; it can happen in smaller games, too. Maintain that freedom. Don't put players in prison.

Chris Hecker

Designer, *SpyParty*

Depth first, accessibility later. I actually stole this one from Rob Pardo of Blizzard and made it my mantra! Always work on the core game loop [to get] it replayable and deep before worrying about making it accessible to new players.

Zach Gage

Designer, *SpellTower*

Have a rich life outside of games. Like all other media, games are fundamentally about expression. This is easy to forget, because they're so complicated to build. When you're in the trenches trying to make a game look, sound and feel amazing, you're too close to your work to understand its significance. In the end, no matter how perfectly or imperfectly your game plays, your game's importance comes from your unique perspective and the design decisions it brought you to. Your experience as a human is your greatest resource as a designer, so be sure to get it some exercise.

VI

MAKE HARD MODE A FEATURE

Difficulty in games is often a product of raising enemy damage-dealing, population or speed (possibly all at once), but forcing us into cover with a hail of super-bullets is stultifying. And yet Hard mode should be inspiring, compelling us to achieve what we thought was impossible. Instead of just upping the sliders, have us apply the skills and knowledge we've learned to earn the pleasure of beating a game.

VII

DON'T PUNISH US TO GET TO PIRATES

Piracy is a profound problem for all makers of videogames, but DRM is the daisy cutter bomb approach to addressing it. Make accessing a game awkward and no one wins; paying customers will resent it, and pirates will probably hack the protection out anyway. Region locking consoles and making singleplayer games that only function when you're online hurt precisely the people who don't deserve it.

VIII

A QTE ISN'T ACTION

QTEs are just as popular as ever. Loaded with the duty of creating the pretence of interaction in the face of linear narrative sequences, their tendency to combine rich animation with simplistic button presses tends to prove the weakness of the link between onscreen and player action. Make them meaningful, and never put a surprise QTE in a five-minute-long cutscene just to check that we're paying attention.

Alex Hutchinson
Creative director, Ubisoft

Thou shalt not invent ridiculous nonsense to fix unintuitive mechanics. If you want your game to be understood quickly and easily, then keep as many of your mechanics and scenarios as relevant and grounded in natural logic as possible. The further you get from a real-world metaphor, the more interface you'll need to design to explain it, the more tutorials you'll need to build to teach it, and the more effort you're requiring from your players to understand and immerse themselves in your world. Everything you make up from whole cloth is asking extra effort from your player (and your dev team), and may not be worth it. Even my mum knows to find the toilet and click on it when her Sim needs to take a bathroom break, while choosing a historical setting, current political issue or pop culture phenomenon as a starting point allows more people to engage with your idea without feeling excluded. And even if you are building fantasy mechanics, you can still use real-world logic to help ease players into it. Most people can intuit that a fire spell would be useful on an ice dragon, while the power of F'Noar will require more explanation. If you do it right, your players will feel included in the logic of your game, instead of excluded.

IX

DON'T FEAR THE REAPER

Most games feature death, but too few are designed around it. Some can seem so afraid of penalising players that they fail to make failure meaningful, or they can go too far with unpredictably distant checkpoints. But some make death a feature: *Trials*' instant restarts; *Infinity Blade*'s rebirths; *Dark Souls*' incremental advancement. Skirting death is thrilling and failure is instructive, so why not use it?

X

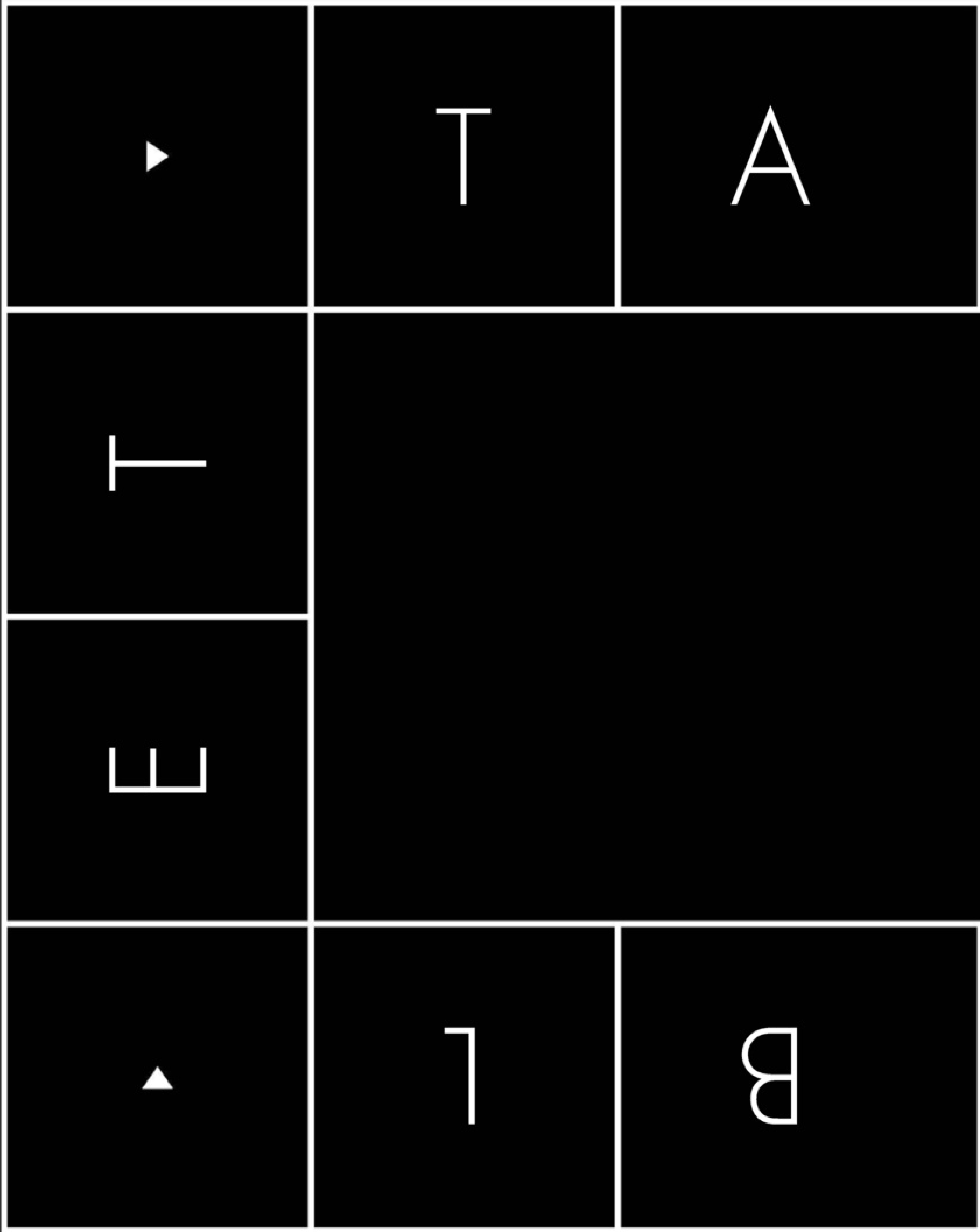
MAKE FIRST STEPS COUNT

Tutorials are perhaps one of the trickiest parts of a game to hone, and among most important: they represent the start of a long and beautiful relationship. Or at least they should. The best tutorials are established on give and take, allowing players to feel like they're grasping the game for themselves, not just following orders. Give them a playground and let them loose, because learning is fun. ■

Kellee Santiago
Co-founder, Thatgamecompany
You must playtest. Not once during beta, just to make sure it's all working; playtest early and often, even though it makes you cringe to watch people 'break' your game. They are helping you to make it so much better. Remember: every great game sucked at some point.

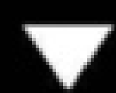
Frank Lantz
Director, NYU Game Center
Aim high. This is the golden age of games, and it's just starting. Games still have an enormous amount of untapped potential. There's an endless variety of undiscovered games out there waiting for you to invent them and some of what's possible will be epoch-defining masterpieces. Shoot for the stars.

Jason Kapalka
Chief game designer, PopCap
If it's fun then go ahead and disregard commandments 1-10. Sometimes a game is just fun for no obvious reason you can explain or put down clearly on paper, or breaks one or more of the rules. If it's fun, all the other rules mean nothing.


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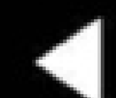
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What happens when boardgames encounter the digital realm? We discover why tablets are providing a fresh slate for this oft-maligned form of gaming, and how going digital is altering the medium forever



We arrange our forces and then go all in, overpowering the Earth Tyrant before us and sending him spinning into the Void. All that remains to mark his passing is a sweet pile of loot, bringing us one step closer to ultimate victory. It's a moment that could have originated in any number of console or PC videogames, but what we've described is based on a card game called *Ascension: Chronicle Of The Godslayer*. Specifically, we're playing the digital version available in the App Store.

It's just one of the many boardgames to benefit from the growing uptake of the iPad and smartphones. In fact, the boardgame format is experiencing a massive, if quiet and rather unusual, resurgence. Take, for example, publisher Days Of Wonder, whose version of *Ticket To Ride* on iOS has been nothing short of a runaway success. According to CEO **Eric Hautemont**, the game of railway route building has "hovered around the top 100-120 grossing games in the US [App Store] consistently since its release in May 2011". It's an impressive claim, given a climate of visibility issues and quick turnover at the top. What's more, over these last two years, the company's digital revenue has increased from three per cent to 20 per cent of the business.

Ticket To Ride is no one-off either – Hasbro's evergreen *Monopoly* and *Scrabble* both occupy positions in the top 100 grossing apps, and the sector is fruitful enough to support studios such as Playdek, whose whole remit is translating boardgames for the digital tabletop.

Perhaps this rather symbiotic success shouldn't be surprising. After all, board and videogames and intermingled freely in the latter's earliest days. Take Will Crowther, who was inspired to create seminal RPG *Colossal Cave* (AKA *Adventure*) after playing Dungeons & ▶ Dragons with his colleagues, a team making Internet forerunner ARPAnet. Recall Deep Blue, the supercomputer designed to beat a chess grand master, advancing our understanding of ludic algorithms. *Ultima*, *Baldur's Gate* and more all owe a debt to games made from cardboard and imagination.

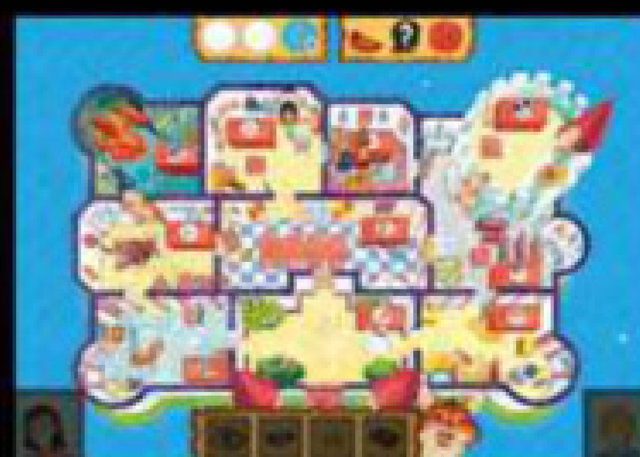
From our perspective now, it might be easy to believe that the digital format has advanced and left the old medium to dwindle away like a vestigial organ, but both have continued to develop. Crucially, the 1995 game of construction and settlement Settlers Of Catan helped to popularise the burgeoning 'eurogame' format, finding a worldwide audience for a new breed of quick-paced tabletop diversion. Fast forward to 2012, however, and it's digital conversions of games that are reshaping the market, but not how you'd expect.

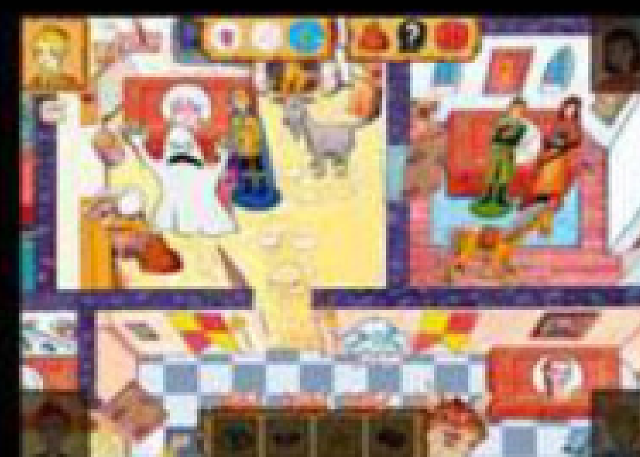
So what makes boardgames such a robust proposition on iOS? Hautemont identifies established fanbases as being key. "A percentage of the people who own the physical boardgame are ▶





George Rothrock (above) and Gary Weis both work at Playdek, which makes digital boardgames





RIGHT Reiner Knizia's Whoowasit?, a game of collaborative mystery solving for children, includes an electronic chest in order to offer a different experience each time. It's just one example of technology affecting game design

introduced a separate version for the iPhone, *Ticket To Ride Pocket*, and we saw an additional bump of 25-30 per cent. I'm convinced that the way we've made the most money from the online game is... the increase in the sales of ▶ the physical boardgame that's resulted from having the digital game."

Of course, iOS isn't the only game in town. Wellknown boardgames have been converted for home consoles across the generations – a recent highlight being *Magic The Gathering: Duels Of The Planeswalkers* – as well as for online portals, and PC. *Monopoly* has long led the way when it comes to hitting every format possible, and **Mark Blecher**, senior vice president of digital media and marketing at Hasbro, reveals it is available on "21 different platforms, including console (PlayStation, PS2, PS3, Wii, 360, DS); mobile (Android and iOS); and connected handhelds (iPad, Kindle, Nook, PlayBook), as well as online though social networking sites". Not only that, but successful spin-off videogames, such as *Monopoly Hotels* are being spawned from the brand. ▶

But there are three reasons why digital boardgame conversions seem to be gathering momentum now in a way they haven't before, and thus why strong sales over the last two years might only be the beginning of their success. The first is tied to the growing number of touchscreen devices in our homes, a form factor that captures the tactility of physical gaming. Players instinctively know how to handle cards and pieces, a process that a controller or mouse only abstracts. The iPad in particular is a great fit, with its 9-inch screen offering enough real estate to encompass most game boards without scrolling, and house an uncluttered UI around them. As such, it becomes almost invisible to the player.

The second is the broad reach of Apple's App Store, especially given ▶

going to come and buy the digital game," he says. "These people are in addition to the people you would get when you release a digital game, no matter what, right? Those physical people that are crossing over to the digital side, if you want, come in addition to the people you would have garnered from a pure videogame. And just that additional flux of people coming in is enough to make you go up in the ranks."

Once they're visible, the App Store also opens these games up to a whole new group of people, some of whom would otherwise be inclined to dismiss them outright. They might be scarred by interminable wet Saturdays spent playing decades-old games, or just perceive boardgaming as for geeks. **George Rothrock**, Playdek's director of business development, explains: "You have this incredibly vibrant, really engaging game world over here that unfortunately, at least in the States, is still kind of looked at as 'Oh, LARPing and Gen Con and costumes,' that sort of thing. Whereas now we've done a bunch of our advertising and our promotion, and some of our greatest contacts have been on app gaming sites. Where the kind of people who get *Angry Birds*, and [would] be totally happy playing *Angry Birds*, but would never really consider themselves a 'gamer', picking up *Food Fight*, and going, 'Oh wow!' But that's a hobby card game that comes out of that world... And they're like, 'This is really pretty cool.'"

Completing a virtuous loop, the exposure feeds right back into the sales of physical boardgames. Hautemont reveals, "When we released *Ticket To Ride* on the iPad in May 2011, we saw the sales of the physical boardgame increase by about 35-40 per cent. And that never dropped down. Literally, within the next ten days the increase kicked in, and that never fell down. A bit later on, in November of last year, we





Eric Hautemont (above) is the CEO of Days Of Wonder, while Reiner Knizia has created hundreds of boardgames

the relatively limited number of machines developers have to accommodate. As Rothrock explains: "From the publishing side, iOS devices are fantastic in the sense that they're very much like console... We're very comfortable with the fact that every iPad 2 is the same." But this just makes it easier to get onto iOS quickly. Playdek's technology isn't tied to a single platform, and all of its games are written in C++, so it's just a question of picking the right devices to target next. A version of its free-to-play *Summoner Wars* is already in the works for Android, for instance, although it isn't ready to announce an release date yet.

Finally, there's the low-cost nature of apps, which encourages the curious to try new experiences, and removes the sting from buying a game you already own. Boardgame creator **Reiner Knizia** – the mind behind hundreds of games, including 2008 German Game Of The Year winner, Keltis – says this is a clear point of differentiation between the Android/iOS marketplaces and those on touchscreen portables, such as the DS. "If I look at the costing structure of the Nintendo [DS] games, because of the high licensing costs from Nintendo, you pay £20-30 for a game. Whereas when I go to the Apple store or to Android, most of them are free, or I pay 99p for it or whatever. So the choices I have there, and the magnitude of what I get for the equivalent of the price of one game [on DS] is just overwhelming."

"You can't just stand in the same space and say, 'I will keep doing what I have been doing.' It's just not going to work"

Hautemont, however, feels Google's OS is too immature. He looks more at consumer respect and installed base. "Android, for me, is not a platform. But Amazon is a platform, because it's got the credit cards on file, and it's got the customer's trust. Steam is a platform."

New pieces are being positioned on this already diverse table of options, too. These include Goko, which was launched in August this year. Based on HTML5 tech, it offers cross-platform play, allowing developers to bring together audiences from Facebook, Google+, Windows, Android and iOS devices, as well as facilitating play on the company's own site, www.goko.com (which was still in beta at the time of writing). Its launch was accompanied by a portfolio of boardgames, and it offers both real-time and asynchronous matches. It's nascent, of course, but worth watching for its ties to some key players in the physical games market, such as Rio Grande.

Back on the tablet side, let's not forget that the devices are continuing to permeate our homes, with analytics firm IHS predicting we'll see 126.6 million units shipped this year, up 56 per cent from 2011. There's also the long-awaited Microsoft Surface, due to hit the market in late October, about the same time as this magazine. It's welcome competition for the iPad, and could provide more opportunities for digital boardgames to captivate new audiences.

So with new markets opening up, what about the future of the games themselves? Knizia feels that change is inevitable. He elaborates: "You can't just stand in the same space and say, 'I will keep doing what I have been doing.' It's just not going to work in our fast-moving environment."

Indeed, some changes are already here. Importantly, the way that people are consuming boardgames has altered, with players spending much more time with them than ever before.



Days Of Wonder's Small World is a younger game than Ticket To Ride, but its sales are ramping up faster, which CEO Hautemont believes might be due to its digital counterpart



Hasbro and EA's *Tiny Tower*-like *Monopoly Hotels* goes to show that a boardgame theme can provide the backbone for pure videogames



atthias Hellmund is head of mobile development at Exozet, which made the iOS version of Settlers Of Catan (truncated simply to *Catan*). He describes the growing symbiotic link between physical and digital boardgames: "Even the best digital version can't replace face-to-face communication between players, the feel and haptics of a physical boardgame with real dice, and the convenience of multiplayer sessions around a large table covered with a boardgame, beer and snacks. But it's an increasingly popular way to brush up your skills against AI players to play boardgames in bed or on-the-go, pause and continue any time you want, and to play online with friends and strangers."

Rothrock's experience tells a similar story: "One of the neat things about doing this is it allows a player to take a game that they love and, in short, play it more... We meet people at Origin, PAX and Essen, when we go to these things, that have told us numerous times 'Oh, we'll sit down and we'll be playing some big game, y'know, at the table, and then we're passing *Ascension* back and forth, or we're passing *Food Fight* back and forth.' Or [they'll be] actually playing on their phones over the Internet against people who are there."

To encourage prolonged engagement, digital boardgames recycle a few tricks that videogames have honed over the decades, namely by offering varied AI opponents and multiple gameplay modes. Adding in a campaign has become a regular part of the digitisation process, whether it's a simple ladder of AI foes to overcome or even bespoke ways to play the game. Knizia's *Keltis* conversion is a good example of the latter, since it includes a custom solo campaign. This sees players taking on ▶ a succession of scenarios, challenges and boards to rack up points. It's something Knizia admits wouldn't be practical with a physical copy, given the setup time and dedication involved, but it clicks neatly with the quick-fire nature of electronic gaming and supplements the social play of the one-to-one conversion.

But extra content has to come from somewhere, and a few developers are inviting community involvement from those all-important existing fanbases to hone, say, their AI opponents' playstyles, as well as giving creators the opportunity to add their wisdom to the conversion process. Some are more hands-on than others, as Hellmund explains: "With *Catan*, for instance, we are lucky to get direct feedback and recommendations from the original game creator, Klaus Teuber. That's probably the ideal setup – to work with a boardgame creator who ▶ has even drafted an initial AI concept that allows us to iterate on."



Exozet's *Catan* includes various AI characters, each with their own playstyle

On the development side, one-to-one conversions can be tricky. Often the biggest challenges involve translating rules that the human can parse easily into the digital realm, where they take on new complexity. "You should have seen the look on the face of our programmers when they were working on doing *Memoir '44 Online*," Hautemont says. "They came to this scenario... where you have paratroopers jumping on the beaches of D-Day, and the rule that our boardgame designer put for the paratroopers is a funny one. It says, 'Grab a handful of plastic soldiers, put your hand 10-30cm above the board, and then drop the figures on the board. Wherever they land is where they parachuted.' That's very easy – that's two sentences in the rules. You should have seen the face of my programmer when he read that, and he's like 'Seriously? I have to draw a hand onscreen and let people hover above the board, and compute where the figures are going to drop?'"

Playdek CTO **Gary Weis** has his own war stories from the *Ascension* front lines, trying to balance the truest possible interpretation of the physical game ▶ with the realities of asynchronous play. "There were certain effects that required players to make a choice during somebody else's turn, and we felt it was reasonable to push those decisions to the beginning of the player's turn they affected... There's one card that pulls cards from other players, [and] if you resolve those decisions first, they might have fewer cards in their hand to pull from. So there are slight nuances that are sacrifices we've had to make. It's for the betterment of every single game when that situation might arise once every 100,000 games. We have to sit down and decide how frequently are we going to encounter this, and does it really change how people play the game?"

On the flip side, digital number crunching can help creators introduce ▶

new rules that would be too laborious in the real world. Hautemont talks about the potential for digital-only races in its *Small World* app, where the idea for a power is fun, but too unwieldy to track at game night. And processing power can be used to support current games via companion apps, too. Guillotine Games' Zombicide can call in the aid of an iPad alongside its board to help players mange its dynamic ruleset and levelling.

In the longterm, we can expect even greater changes. For a start, boardgame creators now have to consider the digital implications of their designs, which will surely alter the games arriving on the market. Hautemont lays out his publishing philosophy: "If someone comes up with an absolutely brilliant boardgame design that is absolutely impossible to translate online, we may still go ahead and publish it, but it is very unlikely. And likewise in the opposite direction, it's very unlikely that we would develop a digital game that didn't [work] as a boardgame, because we think that what differentiates us is that we're doing both."

"I think having that exposure to see this is a valid type of gaming that might engage people who experience it will open it up"



TICKET TO RIDE
Publisher Days Of Wonder **Developer** In-house
Format iOS **URL** www.bit.ly/UiXyEQ

***Ticket To Ride* is a snappy game of resource management, risk-and-reward decisions, and tactically blocking opponents, all dressed up in a technicolour train theme. Your goal is to claim the routes to specific destinations by collecting coloured train cards, which you then cash in to build up a network of lines between key cities.**



ASCENSION: CHRONICLE OF THE GODSLAYER
Publisher Playdek **Developer** In-house
Format iOS **URL** www.bit.ly/QX0OS8

***Ascension* is a card game that asks you to battle against monsters, win points and spend runes on acquiring ever more powerful cards for your snowballing deck. At its best, you chain several abilities together into flowing combos, which can be particularly fun in multiplayer matches.**



CATAN
Publisher USM **Developer** Exozet
Format iOS **URL** www.bit.ly/T41VfY

Resource management and expansion are the twin pillars of *Catan*. Each turn, the dice are rolled and every player collects resources for any hexes they border with that number. This means you're never out of the game, and must keep an eye on your opponents. The UI makes keeping track easier, freeing you to plan your next move.



REINER KNIZIA'S TIGRIS & EUPHRATES
Publisher Sage Board Games **Developer** Codito Development **Format** iOS **URL** www.bit.ly/QJTD09

A classic in hobbyist circles, *Tigris & Euphrates* is a tile-laying game of empire building. You place leaders on clusters of tiles, or 'kingdoms' to claim their points, which can lead to the outbreak of war. It looks complex, but the digital version has an excellent tutorial to get you started quickly.

Creatively, Knizia believes having a processor to hand can refine the play experience, and help him drill down to what makes games fun. "I'm not talking more complex games, but you can make more sophisticated games. Games which are more realistic, which have more sophisticated backgrounds, but you are not burdening the player with it [by asking them] to do the whole scoring and bookkeeping and so on... I do not like games where you are essentially just moving pieces around and doing the bookkeeping all the time. This keeps you occupied but you are not really playing. What I want to do is I want to be able to concentrate on my strategy, on my move and what I do. In boardgames, in order to put this into the foreground, all the other things need to be very simple."

Weis, meanwhile, envisions greater visibility for boardgames attracting new creators to the space, especially given a lower barrier to entry than indie videogame creation. "There's a much longer stretch to get a videogame built. There's so much that has to go in, just even having a basic engine and the basic components and understanding how all those pieces fit together. It takes a lot of work and a lot of experience, even with the tools that are available today, which are much greater than George and I were given. But to build a boardgame like this, you just need 3x5 -inch cards and pen. And you can get some wooden chips, and some poker chips, and off you go: make whatever type of game you want. I think having that exposure to see this is a valid type of gaming that might engage people who experience it will open it up."

We're seeing traffic the other way as well – indie developer Zach Gage recently funded a new boardgame, Guts For Glory, through Kickstarter. As the visibility of boardgaming grows, it's not hard to imagine more digital designers dipping into the physical side to express their concepts, and perhaps then converting them afterwards.

For Knizia, it all adds up to an exciting time to be making boardgames. "If you have no movement, it's very hard to do anything new. But if the world changes it opens up so many opportunities to do new things and be creative, because nothing like this has been done before." ■





Exozet's head of mobile development, Matthias Hellmund (above), and Hasbro's senior VP of digital media, Mark Blecher

SCREEN HERO

We talk to director Rich Moore to learn how he rendered the world of Disney's Wreck-It Ralph, a flim that plugs into gaming culture





BEING VOCAL

The voice actors in animated movies are usually filmed as they do their character's voice, providing animators with visual cues. But for Wreck-It Ralph, director **Rich Moore** reveals: "We actually had Jack [McBrayer, who plays Fix-It Felix] and John [C Reilly, Wreck-It Ralph] meet with the animators and talk about the characters. And it's odd that this never really happens, [because], for the animators, it really helped them get into the characters' heads...We also cast John and Jack because they're perfect for these roles; when we started writing this, we had certain types for the different roles, so we knew we wanted Sarah [Silverman] to play Vanellope, John to play Ralph, and so on."



ithin the office building that Disney Animation calls home in Burbank, California, there's an archive of misfit ideas. These are concepts that someone once considered turning into a movie or short film, but for whatever reason were never able to bring to fruition.

Until recently, one of those forgotten ideas was a movie about the secret life of a videogame character. "They tried it in the '90s, I think it was called High Score, but it went nowhere," says director **Rich Moore** as he fiddles with a little Bowser toy that someone has left in a conference room. "And they tried it again in 2000, and called it Joe Jump, but it hit a dead end as well."

Until Moore came along, that is. A veteran of animated comedy shows such as The Simpsons and Futurama, Moore has now directed Wreck-It Ralph, an animated movie about the antagonist in a fictional '80s arcade game called *Fix-It Felix Jr.* Tired of doing the same thing for 30 years, and of the role he's been assigned in life, Ralph (voiced by Talladega Nights' John C Reilly) starts jumping into other games to prove to everyone, including himself, that while he may be the bad guy, he's not a bad person.

Remarkably, when Moore first considered making a movie about the life of a videogame character, he understood why the idea had been rejected so many times before. "Without looking at what the other people had done, I started to think about what kind of story we could tell," he recalls. "But after thinking about it for about a week, I was convinced it would be horrible. What kind of story could you tell with characters who do the same thing over and over? But then there was a moment where we realised that it's actually a great conflict. What would it be like to be someone like that?"

Still, it wasn't until screenwriter Phil Johnston (Cedar Rapids) and Moore looked at things from a different perspective that their film really came together. "The movie was originally going to be about Felix [the good guy in Ralph's game]," says Moore, "but we realised his story wasn't that interesting. A good guy who becomes a better guy? Then we realised we could make it about Ralph, about a bad guy who's tired of being the bad guy."

While kids will enjoy the silly verbal sparring, the film resonates on a different level with adults

In a way, it sounds like a similar approach to Pixar's Toy Story 3. Not just in showing the life of inanimate objects when humans aren't looking, but in telling a mature story by enlisting childhood memories and reference points. After watching about 25 minutes of Wreck-It Ralph, it's obvious that while kids will enjoy the slapstick moments and silly verbal sparring, the film seeks to resonate on a different level with adults. And it's not just for those who grew up with videogames, but also those who feel stuck doing the same job, who are tired of their role in life, or who are simply nursing a midlife crisis.

While finally turning the life of a videogame character into a movie must be at least partial vindication for those ideas still languishing in the vaults of Disney Animation, it also marks the point at which videogames' language and iconography are seen as being able to support a big-budget movie for mainstream consumption. It's a leap of recognition – remember that it was only six years ago that Hollywood gave the green light to Stay Alive, a horror flick about a videogame that kills people. But just as games have matured over the years, so have the people who play them. ➊

Ralph's game, *Fix-It Felix Jr*, gives him a role that Donkey Kong would sympathise with: to lob debris from the top of the screen at the hero





Sugar Rush, appropriately enough, looks like the setting that will provide some of Wreck-It Ralph's sweetest emotional moments



oore, for example, turns 50 next year, and like so many working on Wreck-It Ralph, he's a gamer. "I spent a lot of money on games when I was a kid," he says with a grin. "I spent a lot of time in arcades playing *Dig Dug* and *Street Fighter*. More recently, the game I loved while working on this movie was *Saints Row: The Third*, which is just absolute mayhem."

It's not only the director who has a love for the source material, but the whole team, which has resulted in the movie's slew of high-profile character cameos. These include Clyde from *Pac-Man*, *Street Fighter*'s Zangief, and Doctor Eggman from *Sonic The Hedgehog*. "The story team had free rein to put in any jokes that they had with a game character," Moore explains, "and if it worked, then we would go to the game company and see if we could have them in the movie."

"There was a lot of debate about whether anyone under 35 would know what an arcade is"

What's more, when Wreck-It Ralph features cameos from, say, *Street Fighter*'s Ryu or Sonic The Hedgehog, they're voiced by the same actors who play them in the games. "I wanted to be authentic to the characters when possible," reveals Moore. "Being a fan of this stuff, I know that if it was a character I was a fan of, I'd want them to sound like they do in the games."

In fact, part of what promises to make Wreck-It Ralph a success is that people at all levels, from the creative team to those in positions of power at Hollywood studios, are gamers. It's similar to the what we saw a few years ago with comic book movies. Where before they were often knock-offs, or evinced a disregard for the existing fanbase, now you have more writers, directors, and studio heads understanding why you need to respectful of The Avengers. Such films have proved that this approach can pay off financially as well as creatively, too. As such, Wreck-It Ralph is another indication that the saturation of games in culture has reached a tipping point – a touchstone of similar import to former US President Bill Clinton recently referencing the experience of gaming during an interview on The Daily Show.

Moore and his coworkers researched (OK, played) a lot of real games to make sure their fictional ones – including a sci-fi shooter called *Hero's Duty* and the Candy Land-meets-*Mario Kart* racer *Sugar Rush* – felt like the real thing. "Since we are dealing with specific genres," Moore says, "we looked at such sci-fi shooters as *Gears Of War* to see what it is that makes a shooting game feel different from a racing game."

"But making it look like a game that's already out wasn't enough," explains art director **Mike Gabriel**. "When we met with real game designers, such as Avalanche [a division of Disney Interactive], their whole thing was, 'What are we bringing to the next game that no one else has?'"

In fact, by setting Wreck-It Ralph in an arcade – where he uses a power strip to travel from one game to another like it's Clapham Junction – there was some concern that the film might be too grown-up. "There was a lot of debate about whether anyone under the age of 35 would know what an arcade is," Moore admits. "So I went to my son, who was 14 or 15 at the time, and asked him: 'Do you know about arcades, and *Pac-Man*, and these old games?' I don't know if kids his age can feel nostalgic, but he seemed to have a warmth and regard for this stuff. It was actually still a nail-biter until the trailer came out and people really responded [positively] to it." ■



Release November 2 (US), February (UK)



GAME ON!

Disney has made a playable *Fix-It Felix Jr* arcade cabinet to promote the film, but you can also play that game on the movie's official website (www.disney.go.com/wreck-it-ralph). The site offers browser-based versions of the film's other fictional games, too, the sci-fi shooter *Hero's Duty* and arcade racer *Sugar Rush*. For something more substantial, Disney Interactive and Activision are collaborating on a *Wreck-It Ralph* game, a platformer on the Wii, 3DS and DS that will expand upon the movie's story, while Ralph will reunite with his pals Sonic and Dr Eggman as a playable character in Sega's *Sonic & All-Stars Racing: Transformed*.

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Jet Set Radio 360, PC, PS3
The HD treatment done right. Smilebit's skating spray 'em up is as much a breath of fresh air today as it was when it debuted at the turn of the millennium. The simple inputs and unusual pace of the game will take some adjusting to for those bred on the overactive iterations of *Tony Hawk* or the intricacies of *Skate*. But it's this very purity of play, married to the pure cartoon aesthetic of block colour and bold lines, that makes *Jet Set Radio* still feel revolutionary.

FIFA 13 360, PC, PS3
Pitch-perfect: the long-running series has never looked better or felt more precise. As feature-packed as ever, this year's model almost has too many peripheral distractions to divert your attention away from its sublimely balanced core. The AI is now a match for even the most elite of *FIFA* fans, offering a level of challenge that – finally – makes offline and solo play a worthy investment of time and energy.

Super Hexagon iOS
As much as we adore it, there was a suspicion that once we were done with the ridiculously hard endgame, we'd move on to new obsessions. How wrong we were. *Super Hexagon* just feels too good beneath your thumbs. There's still that caffeine-like jolt when we tap the start button, launching us afresh into its abstracted bullet hell death spiral. The neon colour palette and Chipzel tunes are simply bonus electricity.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Interesting choices arise from complex decisions

It might be clamoured for by those brought up on *Thief*, *System Shock* and *Deus Ex*, but player choice doesn't always make for a good selling point. Once agency has made its way to the back of the box, it's usually been distilled to marketable extremes. Will you be good or evil? Hero or villain?

But it's often the less polarised choices that are the challenging ones. *XCOM* (p102) has no interest in polarised, cut-and-dry morality. As its alien invasion escalates, you become less capable of answering the world's distress calls. With simultaneous attacks in Japan, France and Argentina, and only one squad of marines available to save the day, you're forced to make a cost-benefit analysis and then a judgement call. This isn't a moral choice – you'll make your decision according to your resources and the potential rewards on offer, but the fact you're failing to help two cities in need can't help but add a dash of drama.

Dishonored (p90) is full of interesting tactical decisions, too. Its levels are richly complex environments to stalk and sneak through, with multiple entrances and routes, while skill upgrading adds an extra layer to the decision making. Unlike Firaxis, however, Arkane does add a moral layer of sorts in the form of its Chaos system, with the city of Dunwall becoming more or less stable in relation to your bodycount. It's a butterfly effect that feeds back into the game (a more unstable city is more rat-infested, its strongholds better defended), but it's one that can't help but give the impression that you are being judged as well. It's a subtler form of judgement than a simple good or evil character alignment, however, and it's one that avoids literally framing violence as the more evil option. What both games show, in other words, is that the less binary and clear-cut the decision offered to the player, the more interesting it is to make the choice.



Dishonored

Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer Arkane Studios
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

www.bit.ly/PTGyQ8
Screenshot gallery

Dunwall is built on whale oil, a glowing source of energy used to power this industrial city. Down its wide river sail vast whaling ships, which are manned by sailors ready to face tempestuous seas in the hope of finding adventure away from the stinking backstreets. And when they catch one of the curiously mutated beasts, they hang it above the deck and strip away its fattiest bits while it's still alive, leaving it to thrash as it slowly dies on the way back to port.

Dunwall's fast-fading opulence is founded on a culture of cruelty, then, and its many beautiful sights are marred by ugliness. Its upper classes revel in greed, crime and debauchery, residing atop an underclass that's been driven to its knees by plague, which has left swathes of the city empty, districts blocked off and corpses littering the streets. Those who haven't died already are often either coughing and spluttering from infection, or have become moaning, savage Weepers. The sickness is borne by plague rats, hordes of which infest every alley and fine house alike. They're a constant, squeaking presence, and the physical manifestation of Dunwall's profound corruption.

Dishonored's city is drawn with breathtaking depth. Its art design might place it on the foundations of 19th century London, crowding its spaces with smokestacks, brick tenements and hulking factories, but it's also run through with forbidding fascist classicism as well as opulent baroque and art nouveau touches. And fantasy is never far away, brought to the fore by magic; fantastic contraptions, such as the curved-legged Tallboys; and a set of weird, vicious animals, which includes the sharp-toothed Hagfish and brutal Wolfhounds. Although you experience Dunwall broken into large but discrete chunks separated by loading screens, it's a place realised with a richness that few games have ever managed. There's a sense that there's history behind every detail, and indeed you'll discover far more about the place through the many texts spotting the levels, learning about the intricacies of whaling and the sinister workings of the quasi-religious Overseer order.

The city is peopled with a roster of expressive and stylised characters, spanning from the faintly inbred aristocratic conceit of Lord Pendleton to Granny Rags' sour insanity, and voiced by redoubtable acting talent. Susan Sarandon's performance as Rags is at once vulnerable and malevolent, while Brad Dourif's Piero is a crumpled 'natural philosopher', evoking his role as Doc Cochran in Deadwood with a bitter twist. The people of *Dishonored*'s world feel fully formed even with little exposition, and though most reveal themselves to be unscrupulous and venal, you always want to know more about them. There's little true evil here, just devouring weakness, and understanding motives becomes a natural part of planning the demise of your marks. Those targets are chosen by your allies, the Loyalists, a group that wishes to restore the kidnapped daughter of the dead empress to Dunwall's throne.

Rats aren't just a symbol of Dunwall's corruption – they also symbolise your own. Playing as Corvo, a former trusted companion of the empress who's been framed for her murder, you'll find the rats rise in population as you kill to cut a path to a pardon and the city's freedom. *Dishonored* watches your every move, the world reacting to how energetically you take to your role as an assassin. And with magical skills like Corvo's, you're likely to be highly energetic. Principal among them is Blink, a power that enables you to teleport to a point close by. It opens up the rooftops and anywhere else within its range to exploration. This might be behind guards, say, either to terminate or avoid them. Other abilities enable you to see enemies through walls, and possess animals and humans, although the latter requires an upgrade. You can slow, and later stop, time; summon a blast of wind to knock unfortunates flying; or conjure rats to consume them. You buy skills and upgrades with Runes found around the levels, but using powers requires only mana, which is in plentiful supply.

Corvo is one of videogaming's more capable aggressors, not least because his skills are deliciously fun to use



But that's just half of Corvo's toolset, because he's also a capable fighter with a formidable arsenal. There's his pistol, a flintlock affair that's as powerful and as loud as a shotgun, and just as biased towards close range. There's a crossbow for longer shots, with Corvo's grotesque metal mask's eyeglass used to zoom in like a scope. The bow's speciality is silent headshots, either with your small stock of Sleep Darts or standard bolts. There's also a grenade and the Spring Razor, a mine packed with coiled razor wire. Finally, there's your blade, which perfectly suits both slicing throats and tense duels in which parrying is the secret to sending your foes staggering. In return for money you find lying around the levels, Piero will upgrade these weapons, either by increasing their ammo capacity or power. Once your pistol can fire three rounds in quick succession, you're positively lethal in any situation.

Corvo is therefore one of videogaming's more capable aggressors, not least because his skills are deliciously fun to use, and the smoothness of the controls comes together with his weapons and magic to thrilling effect. It becomes second nature to Blink behind a guard and execute him in one sweep of your sword. As two others gradually realise you're there, why not slow time, run at them and clamp a Spring Razor onto one? Blink away and it will explode in a cloud of wires that will slice them into bloody chunks. When normal time returns, every local enemy will be aware of you, but it's no problem – simply possess the nearest and walk away. You could also have found a vantage point and soundlessly assassinated everyone, or rewired local enforcement technology to fry the guards.



ABOVE Key to sword fighting is the parry move, executed by hitting the defend button just before an attack lands, which sends your adversary staggering away. It doesn't do a lot of good when he pulls out his pistol, however.
LEFT Tallboys are Dunwall's biggest threat, their riders shielded by armour and armed with explosive arrows. But they're vulnerable to one-hit strikes if you can jump – or Blink – up to the rider's level

RIGHT An Arc Pylon will electrocute you if you venture too close, but they can be disabled if you can find and disconnect the power source. Alternatively, you could get to the control box and rewire it so that it disintegrates enemies instead.
FAR RIGHT A whaling ship sails down Dunwall's river. *Dishonored* is full of beautifully composed scenes, showcasing its art design's watery lighting and surreal detailing





ABOVE Corvo's powers are more than enough to allow you to traverse apparently impregnable areas, either by using Blink or Possession, while Dark Vision gives you all the information you need about the environment

Dishonored combines such freedom with level design that provides many options beyond combat. Buildings often have multiple entry points, some of which are only accessible through Corvo's powers – such as vents through which possessed rats can scurry – while others require exploration to find. The spaces are dynamic, rather than broken down into the distinct choices that, say, *Deus Ex* gave you between combat, hacking, dialogue or engineering, so you'll find yourself naturally shifting approaches, flipping from aggression one moment to subterfuge the next. Central to all of this is Dark Vision, the magical skill that allows you to see the silhouettes of close-by living beings. Combined with markers that show you where and how far away your objectives are, you're equipped with huge knowledge about the levels, and with it comes the capacity to make choices.

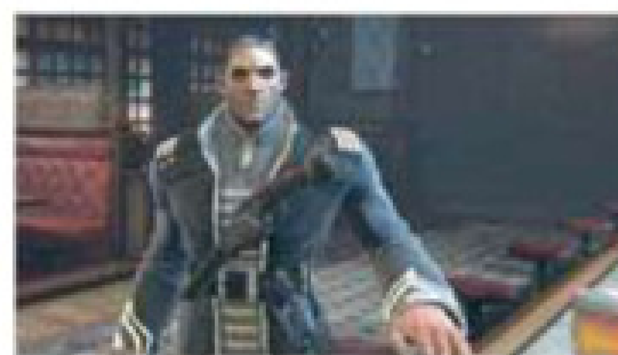
In fact, choice is the core of *Dishonored*. Most of the levels contain side-quests and many different ways of dealing with your marks – some non-lethal – if you can find the right cues to prompt you to them, which may be overheard conversations or texts you've read. But very little is predefined amid a wide variety of scenarios, which bounce from stealthily infiltrating a brothel filled with guards to walking freely around a masked ball attempting to identify your target. The key is a robust and logical AI system that's ripe for exploitation, giving you not only a sense of power but also the chance for multiple 'what if' replays.

By the end of the game, the conclusion of which comes rather abruptly given the story's systematic build-up, you realise that Corvo is unstoppable. By then the challenge mostly comes from self-set restraint in not killing or being seen (both of which are recorded on end-of-level scorecards) instead of simply wading through with gun smoking and blade flashing. Indeed, *Dishonored*'s world encourages a non-lethal approach, affecting the rat population, NPC reactions and the game's ending. Some characters will view you with disgust if you kill with abandon and rain will fall, giving the impression that the game is judging you even as it hands you a lethal skillset that is so enjoyable to use.

The creators of *Dishonored* know all about the tension between what it offers you and how it rewards you. They even give you a clue at its very beginning with a line of graffiti on a wall in the prison where you start: "We all start with innocence, but the world leads us to guilt." Faced by a world in which almost everyone has been corrupted by power in one way or another, you alone have the agency to carve your own path. That gratifying weaponry comes with the implicit request for you to exercise self-control over it, to avoid the easy routes that your victims have taken. You don't have to kill if you apply yourself, and achieving this conveys *Dishonored*'s biggest personal rewards.

It's a brave and interesting statement to make about responsibility and the nature of choice, and if you don't mind being mildly rebuked for having uncomplicated fun, you don't need to engage with it at all. For the rest of us, it adds another layer to this sad city. It's a rare delight to play a game with such consistency of vision, its art design, level architecture, rulesets, storylines and writing all working in lockstep. It's more than enough to give you a deep connection to Dunwall, and the impulse to work to save it.

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DUNWALL IS IN THE DETAILS

Dishonored is structured as a series of chapters along a linear narrative path, seeing you visiting different districts. Between missions, you return to the Loyalists' base, the Hound Pits pub. You never have to leave an area before you want to, a welcome feature given that each is filled with secrets and details to discover. Runes and Bone Charms are the game's collectibles, but texts, incidental dialogue, sub-quests and extra character interactions add colour to the world. The latter becomes even more alive when you discover that if you revisit areas everything is as you left it, bar bodies being tidied up and guards replenished.

Post Script

Interview: Harvey Smith, co-creative director; Raphael Colantonio, co-creative director

Dishonored's central theme concerns the idea that with great power comes a lot of responsibility. You may have many skills to kill your enemies with, but you'll also face the consequences of your actions. We asked co-creative directors **Raphael Colantonio** and **Harvey Smith** how they realised this motif. Warning: the following contains mild spoilers.

Despite giving you a lethal arsenal, *Dishonored* tacitly criticises you for killing. What was the thinking behind that?
Harvey Smith We never wanted to be judgemental – that's why we didn't model good and evil. We tried to model stability and instability with the 'Chaos' system. You can solve your problems with a corrupt government by slitting the right throats, or you could solve [them] another way, and that's partly what we tried to model.
Raphael Colantonio I also think that there's something in the emotions [evoked] when you have chosen not to kill. We wanted to play with temptation very early on, about having power and choosing to resist it or not. It's an interesting tension compared to games that just tell you to kill everybody, or not kill anyone.
HS Raph and I spent a lot of time talking about culpability – how much responsibility does the player have? If you give her a game with no options, she's just finishing the game. If you give her a game with the option to kill and it's fun either way, then if she kills the culpability is on her. The Outsider exists as a cautionary figure talking about power and how you use it.

Isn't it also partly on you, the designers, to bear responsibility for a player's actions, because you're giving players a certain toolset?
HS If one path in the game was un-fun and the other was fun and tempting, then yes; it's absolutely true you can bias the system one way or the other and make a statement through it. What we tried to do was to make both paths fun, and both power fantasies of different sorts. There's the killing and mastering enemies power fantasy on one hand, and the breaking and entering, eavesdropping, voyeuristic fantasy on the other.
We'd like to think that both paths are supported, but asymmetrically, and one is not given greater value than the other. You have the Sleep Darts and the choke, of course, but you also have lots of support: AI not noticing you if you're quiet, mobility options allowing you to move away from where the combat is, and the story alternate resolutions, like branding Campbell or sending Lady Boyle off with her obsessive admirer.

Have players in playtests reacted how you expected?
RC We thought so. We built the game to be direct, but they often go into the world and want to be good, in a way. We've seen everything: some are very direct, like following the main objective and killing everything in their path. But the main proportion want to be good.



Harvey Smith, co-creative director



Raphael Colantonio, co-creative director

"Choice is a very invisible value. You can feel it and it's impactful, but it's hard to put on the back of the box"



The violent approach seems to be ratified by the game, because the crossbow and pistol feel so powerful and responsive.
RC In movies, they often do that thing where the hero, even if he's meant to be a good guy and isn't meant to kill people, finds himself in a situation in which he eventually loses his temper and kills everyone around him. I think there's a little of that in our game, where you try not to kill and try to be good, and then reach a point where you say, "Right, now I'm going to show you exactly what I'm capable of." And after that moment when you unleash your powers, sometimes you reload the game because you feel guilty, but you feel powerful.

The theme is echoed strongly in the story – most characters are corrupted by power. Did the story inform the theme, or the theme inform the story?
RC It's more a value we've had for a long time and we've both explored them in the games we've previously made. Having the player feel the weight of his actions is something we like, so naturally everything we do runs with these values.

Why do few games focus on providing such choice?
RC There might be other reasons, but I think one is that publishers are driven by tangible features: bullet-time, or a new game engine. Having multiple choices is a very invisible value. You can feel it and it's impactful, but it's hard to put on the back of the box. According to the common [publisher's] knowledge of what sells and what doesn't, it's hard to sell.
HS And it's just harder to take the visceral agency of a firstperson shooter and mix it with the choice and consequence, character building and narrative of an RPG. I used to deny it. After *Deus Ex*, I did some speeches in which people asked whether it was harder, and I would say, "No, no, no – in a way it's easier, because the game system handles it all for you!" But that's bullshit. Over time, you realise that basically you're making two games at once.
RC Two or three, in fact. And if you focus on just one game instead of three, then you have more time to polish; the quality of everything can be higher. In our case, a player will see maybe 50 or 60 per cent of the content in one playthrough. In two our three playthroughs, there are probably still some things they didn't see. Developers like to spend extended time on 100 per cent of what the players are going to see. ■

Resident Evil 6

Resident Evil 6 finishes the grisly job started by *Resident Evil 5*, and completes the series' protracted mutation into an all-out action game. The tank controls are out, replaced by a dual-analogue setup that's ornamented with a set of evasive dives and rolls. After the intensely pressurised action of *Resident Evil 4* and *5*, it's a change that feels overdue, but diehard advocates of clunkier-feeling *Resident Evils* can rest assured that playing this iteration still requires some wrestling, if not battling, with the controls.

In theory, you've never had such a flexible moveset with which to tackle the mutated hordes unleashed by Umbrella (sorry, 'Neo-Umbrella'). The new dive move, coupled with the ability to shoot when prone, can add a dash of heroic drama to the most mundane of encounters, as you leap backwards out of the range of a shambling corpse's swinging axe to then dispatch the revenant from the ground. Meanwhile, evasive rolls and slides make last-minute escapes easier than they've ever been. And in typical *Resident Evil* style, the mob of enemies you'll face have mutated in order to counter these skills. *Resident Evil 6*'s zombies can outpace those commonly found in the original game's Spencer Mansion, and that's before you consider their propensity for a last-moment leap or lunge. Then there's the new J'avo, which further develop *Resident Evil 4*'s ingenious decision to unpredictably reward headshots with a more monstrous head. As well as sprouting a new noggin when decapitated, they can swap amputated limbs for huge sinewy arms and ostrich-like legs that let them easily close distance.

In execution, however, *Resident Evil 6* can still feel awkward due to control scheme idiosyncrasies. Some can be put down to poor implementation. Taking cover behind waist-high walls, for instance, requires two button presses (you must first use the shoulder button to aim, then the face button to duck), meaning a very slight but inconvenient pause when you're running to shelter. The cast's adherence to the surface you've planted them on never feels quite as reliable as Marcus Fenix's sticky snap-to system, either. Other limits, such as your characters' temporary vulnerability when they're clambering to their feet, are necessary to stop you being able to spam the dodge moves. Either way, the result is truer to the series' legacy than you might expect. You're nominally nimbler than before, but on occasion you'll struggle to pull off the showy manoeuvres you know the characters are capable of. The camera's habit of hovering in a fetishistic close-up of your character's shoulder, meanwhile, ensures that a significant amount of screen space is still taken up by the player model at all times.

With four campaigns – each designed to offer a distinct play style even as they entwine with one another across the length of the game – there's some fun to be had in working out which character each new aspect of the control system has been built for. It seems it's Chris Redfield who's responsible for the shift towards more typical shooter controls. His chapters move the series closer to a typical squad shooter than we've ever seen before – no, we're not counting dire spin-off *Operation Raccoon City* (reviewed **E240**). He and his squad of BOW-hunting marines look and sound the part, while the camera's tendency to wheel around unexpectedly in order to pick out helicopters crashing into skyscrapers adds the requisite scripted bombast.

Publisher Capcom
Developer In-house
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now, TBC (PC)

The fear that you're about to play a Resident Evil-flavoured take on Gears is the scariest thing about the game, frankly



More importantly, however, the J'avo he faces have automatic weapons, half-decent aim, and know how to use cover, forcing players to do the same. The momentary fear that you're about to play a *Resident Evil*-flavoured take on *Gears* is the scariest thing about the game, frankly, but it's swiftly assuaged when knife-wielding J'avo start flanking you, or when injured ones mutate and charge. One set of mutants even plays with cover-shooter convention when they sprout spider legs, scuttle along the ceiling and try to flush you out with grenades. Echoes of *Resident Evil 4*'s high-tension combat ring here – *Resident Evil 6* is still about moving, picking your moments, spotting opportunities for ammo-conserving melee kills, and not letting yourself get surrounded – but the overall feeling is a bit less oppressive than before. Chris's sections in particular can't seem to decide whether they want you to be shooting from the hip or making each bullet count. Long-range cover-based combat tends to use up ammo reserves more swiftly than close-up headshots, and more than once we found our supplies running dry, leaving us to laboriously punch our way out of a fight.

Newcomer Jake Muller's missions feel similar, although he has a focus on melee combat that, to fully explore, requires a sequence where his guns are taken away from him. The rest of the time, you'll need to manually switch to his special unarmed ability set, rendering using these moves awkward at best. And yet this represents perhaps the closest this game has to offer to an evolution of *Resident Evil*'s combat template; it certainly makes running out of ammo less frustrating.

Like Redfield, Muller mostly fights the J'avo, and his campaign follows the same Europe to China arc. Leon Kennedy's story, however, is a little different, being blessed with the best set-pieces and cursed with the worst enemies. His campaign seeks to recreate the escalating B-movie insanity of *Resident Evil 4* while paying at least visual homage to the first and second games' settings. Ivy University's splendid decor functions as a stand-in for the Spencer Mansion, while the surrounding town of Tall Oaks channels Raccoon City. Compared to the J'avo, however, the zombies he's thrown up against are (gruesome visual design aside)



LEFT These hulking, glowing-eyed supersoliders turn up two-thirds of the way through Chris's campaign, and are as close as the game comes to typical shooter adversaries. Fast and handy with a sniper rifle, they're also capable of mutating. BELOW Capcom seems so pleased with the idea of unleashing a monster within the confines of an aeroplane that it tries it more than once across the game. One of the many QTEs sees Leon crash land the vehicle after the fight



ABOVE For all the awkwardness of the controls, *Resident Evil 6* has some sublime presentational touches, such as crash zooms on melee moves and depth-of-focus effects that lend both life and drama to the action onscreen



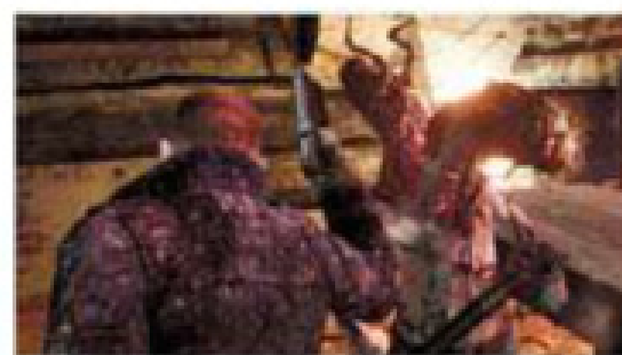


ABOVE Ada's campaign is singleplayer-only (though you can still cross over with other players), meaning no AI partner. This restores some of the controlled pacing damaged by the shift to co-op

bland, dangerous in numbers, and not capable of the J'avo's game-changing mutations. Seemingly aware that a single zombie no longer poses the threat it did in 1996, Leon's campaign rigs its intended jump scares and contrives its tension. Early on, sprawled-out zombies lie unresponsive and inert. Then you step across an arbitrary line, at which point the monster will lunge for your leg, even if you've taken the prudent precautionary measure of shooting them repeatedly in the face.

All the campaigns have their moments, but all suffer from *Resident Evil 6*'s most severe flaw: atrocious pacing on both a minute and grand scale. Cutscenes and loading screens stall your progression through chapters, while the action itself is broken up erratically, veering between barrages of QTE-reliant action one moment and overlong siege scenarios the next. And as generous as the four campaigns are, there's some occasional but inevitable reuse of ideas. Is searching for memory sticks in a blizzard that different from searching for a key in a fog-shrouded cemetery? That *Resident Evil 6* manages to support the weight of all the content on its shoulders is a pleasant surprise in the age of the six-hour shooter, but at times you'll suspect this is a 30-hour game desperately trying to extend itself into a 40-hour one.

There's a reason why the game's so vast: it needs to be able to squeeze in up to three other players. More so than even *Resident Evil 5*, this is a game built for cooperative play, as evinced by the constant presence of an AI companion when you play three of the four campaigns alone. These characters are less burdensome than Sheva was, requiring no inventory management at all, but even so there are times when these narrative hangers-on will find ways to sabotage your progress.



PERKED UP

Resident Evil 6 has a perk system, although you'll barely notice it given the pitifully slow rate at which new abilities unlock. You can equip three skills at once, with the abilities on offer ranging from increased damage against specific enemy types to extra item drops. The system does offer an incentive to enter Mercenaries mode, though (unlocked from the start here), where skill points can be farmed at an increased rate and characters get to battle enemy types that they won't encounter in the main game.

ABOVE Between crypts, mines, dirty back streets and rusted labs, *Resident Evil 6* doesn't pass up an opportunity to swing the spotlight onto decrepid architecture. That said, no one does richly detailed decay like Capcom

Too many set-pieces have been designed so as to occupy one player with a menial task (turning a lever, say) while the other provides cover. Such moments work with a human at your side, but it's simply luck whether or not the AI will prioritise the correct targets. Play on your own and you'll constantly be waiting for the AI to catch up with you in order to open doors, too, which is annoying during downtime and positively infuriating when you're under sustained assault.

It's a bloated, often incoherent game, but the most frustrating thing about *Resident Evil 6* is that (Chris's focus on cover shooting aside) it's not an unimaginative one. It might feel padded at times, but Capcom always has something new to show you after the filler, such as a fresh campaign, another repellent boss form, a surprising enemy type, a co-op vehicle section, or an odd location to explore. Even replaying a chapter from the perspective of your teammate will offer a tweaked weapon set and slightly altered routes. In always trying to offer something more, *Resident Evil 6* fails to refine what it has already given you. But whatever else you might say about the game, it achieves something that its predecessor never did: it steps out of *Resident Evil 4*'s shadow and becomes its own game. Sadly, it's a game that redefines the series as a loose collection of action scenarios with a shared theme of mild sci-fi horror. It's a game so eager to please that it can't settle on an identity. And it's a game that marks a critical point in the series' history. *Resident Evil* might have lost interest in pure horror a while back, but it seems Capcom would rather you were thrilled than afraid.

6

Post Script

What is the role of story in a Japanese action game?

Earlier this year, **Alex Hutchinson**, the creative director of *Assassin's Creed III*, criticised what he saw as the overly tolerant attitude of the western press towards Japanese games' stories. "I think there's a subtle racism in the business," he argued, "especially on the journalists' side, where Japanese developers are forgiven for doing what they do. I think it's condescending to do this. Just think about how many Japanese games are released where their stories are literally gibberish. Literally gibberish. There's no way you could write it with a straight face."

Hutchinson's example was Platinum Games' *Bayonetta*, which managed to take a Miltonian tale of warring angels and infuse it with a generous amount of disco-flavoured eccentricity. It also added dashes of time travel, didn't really bother with character motivation and played even more loose with its Old Testament mythology than Ignition's *El Shaddai*. We suspect *Resident Evil 6* will leave him cold, too.

It's hard to know, or care, what's happening in *Resident Evil*'s world now. Earlier games in the series pretended to take place in a world like our own, with outbreaks of horrible, plot-driving viruses being swiftly contained. By this latest iteration, the *Resident Evil*-verse seems to have diverged, with impossible-to-ignore bioterrorist attacks sweeping a fictional take on Hong Kong and an equally made-up Eastern European state. Those who have already given up on *Resident Evil*'s story might not care about these changes, of course, but it's worth noting the change in atmosphere they bring. The small scale of the first game's mansion setting brought with it an air of isolation and fear, echoed by *Resident Evil 4*'s impossibly medieval corner of rural Spain, even as it injected more action into the horror. *Resident Evil 6*'s global catastrophe, by contrast, is the kind of setup that allows a squad of commandos led by Chris Redfield to slot seamlessly into the series.

But the problems with *Resident Evil 6*'s narrative go well beyond a change in concept. It's an inconsistent mess, veering between the ridiculous one moment and the hackneyed the next. Chris Redfield's story arc is a standard tale of revenge and responsibility, as the towering pillar of muscle comes to terms with the loss of a unit under his command. Meanwhile, Jake Muller's storyline is an equally typical tale of a lone gun learning to look out for more than just himself. Leon Kennedy, meanwhile, is encumbered with one of gaming's least likely unrequited romances in his pursuit of Ada Wong, a woman he's met twice before (and during both incidents he had more important things on his mind). And those are merely the character arcs – the actual plot is even worse. This is a game in which the villains launch a bioterrorist attack in order to hide the truth about a bioterrorist attack. It should be easy to ignore this, but *Resident Evil 6* spends so much time on its cutscenes, flashbacks and radio transmissions that you suspect Capcom doesn't want you to. Hutchinson's right about one thing: for all of its earnest melodrama, *Gears Of War* tells a more coherent story.

> Resident Evil 6 is at once varied and discordant, more interested in throwing all it can at you than its tonal consistency



Resident Evil 6 also gets something right, however: the four-campaign structure, with its overlapping moments, does lend an epic scale to proceedings. Play through the game and there's the sense of orbiting major events without ever holding their entirety in view. If the story was more intriguing, there would be pleasure to be found in piecing it all together.

On the flip side, that structure leads to a mishmash of tones – Leon's horror, Redfield's gung-ho machismo, Wong's solitary ass-kicking, and Muller's heroic journey. *Resident Evil 6* is at once varied and discordant, more interested in throwing all it can at the player than maintaining tonal consistency. Play the four campaigns one after the other and you might start suspecting that the scenarios were dreamed up first and the massive, meandering narrative was built around them afterwards.

And perhaps this is the difference between some (but not all) western and some (but not all) Japanese games: Capcom's story functions in subservience to the gameplay. Its job is to accommodate the developer's desire to venture down into the depths of a forgotten crypt by supplying contrived motivation, and to find a reason for the primary antagonist to transform into hulking behemoth at short notice – because, well, an ordinary human just isn't that interesting to fight, right? And, of course, Capcom is prepared to sacrifice coherency at the drop of a phial of C-virus if it makes for a good set-piece. We're still not quite sure what a mine cart was doing in that crypt. Hutchinson and his team, by contrast, are making a game in which the story and setting are as key to the series' appeal as the mechanics, and so have different narrative demands.

Either way, it's hard to shake the feeling that *Resident Evil*'s story is becoming unmanageably tangled after seven games and far, far too many spin-offs' worth of continuity. *Resident Evil 6* has four campaigns, after all, and it still only manages to squeeze about two-thirds of the regular cast in. More importantly, no matter how many parasites and pathogens Capcom can invent, the series' bestiary has become familiar, the last two games simply iterating on the template established by *Resident Evil 4*. What this series needs isn't a better-told story, but a fresh start. As both a traditional survival-horror and an action game, *Resident Evil* has thrived. But it's at its best when players don't know what's behind the closed door. ■

Need For Speed: Most Wanted

Publisher EA
Developer Criterion
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release October 30 (US), November 2 (EU)

Need For Speed: Most Wanted opens with a split-second transition from a cinematic to in-game action. Pop-rock blasts out of the speakers as you struggle to keep your Aston Martin under control. Rays of sunlight bounce off asphalt. The engine roars, and your heart pounds. It's an astonishing technical display, sure, but it's also a reminder of the crux of Criterion's race-and-chase epics: seamlessness.

Continuing that philosophy is Easy Drive, the latest shot fired in the war on friction. It's an in-game tool operated via the D-pad that stitches mission selection, car customisation and Autolog recommendations into the fabric of the HUD. It means no more front-end menu hopping, and no more pausing for breath. It's a slight innovation with numerous benefits, and one that feels essential after mere minutes. When you've discovered and collected a handful of the 120-plus cars hidden around *Most Wanted*'s world, Easy Drive offers instant access to them. Likewise, when you've unlocked mods such as re-inflatable tyres, nitrous boosters, or a reinforced chassis for your favourite ride, Easy Drive is your means for selecting a loadout on the fly.

You need to choose carefully, of course, because each of the game's challenges – which include sprint races, cop chases and one-on-one showdowns – has a number of variables, most obviously the terrain, to plan around. It's a shame there's no shortcut to an optimal setup for each vehicle and event, though, since D-pad tapping during the heat of battle can be frustrating at the best of times, and car crushing at the worst.

Criterion has been capturing the speed, sound and sensation of driving exceedingly fast cars for over a decade; it brings *Most Wanted*'s heaving collection of motors – which spans from well-known classics to more obscure beasts such as the Ariel Atom – to life, with handling pitched perfectly between simulation and the arcade. Each vehicle responds differently and requires its own approach as you guide it around smooth curves and drag it down the labyrinthine backstreets of *Most Wanted*'s deliciously varied setting, Fairhaven.

The map blends the geography and style of the team's previous crash 'em up masterpieces into one flowing, coherent whole without feeling like a patchwork. It manages to weave together the high-altitude mountain ranges of *Burnout Paradise*, the downtown alleys of *Burnout Revenge* and the wide-lane highways of *Hot Pursuit*. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a developer peppered with cineastes, Fairhaven is also an amalgam of some familiar movie locales. Whether you fancy recreating car chases from '70s classics à la The French Connection or Vanishing Point, prefer the more modern city-wide carnage of The Fast And The Furious, or even favour a popcorn action-thriller from the past few years, there's a place on the map for that.

As with Hot Pursuit, Autolog elevates Most Wanted from an attractive retail purchase to an essential social experience



Progress is achieved via Speed Points. These are accrued not just by completing challenges, but by dangerous driving in general. Billboard smashing, blazing past speed cameras, initiating and escaping from run-ins with the law: all these and more will rack up the points. Chases can happen at a moment's notice if a blue-and-white catches you behaving badly, and they even turn up during street race challenges, delivering the sort of three-way-battle thrills that will be familiar to anyone who's played *Hot Pursuit*.

A criticism of that game was the crash cam you'd view when you destroyed an opponent, which removed control for a moment. In *Most Wanted*, Criterion has addressed the issue by mostly stripping the crash cam out, although you'll still be shown your own demise in all its windscreen-shattering glory. Takedowns are now almost unremarkable, then; a message pops up to tell you how many points you've earned by turning a rival into scrap metal, and that's that. It's a reinforcement of the sense of seamless play, and Criterion's message seems to be that self-aggrandisement must not break the flow. A further level of immediacy comes courtesy of the petrol stations dotted around the map. Breeze through one and your vehicle is instantly repaired and given a fresh lick of paint. If the cops don't see you make the switch, you'll also escape their pursuit.

As you accumulate Speed Points, you also unlock Most Wanted races – punishing duels against an elite street racer that show off the game's vicious AI at its cruellest. If you're lucky or skilled enough to overcome these challenging foes, you'll move a place further up the leaderboard.

Autolog 2.0 is with you each step of the way, comparing every detail of your time in Fairhaven with that of your friends, and adding a competitive layer to your race to the top. There's little more motivating or infuriating than fighting tooth and nail for a Most Wanted slot and waking up the next day to find a friend's overtaken you. As with *Hot Pursuit*, Autolog elevates *Most Wanted* from an attractive retail purchase to an essential social experience, threading the game's achievements and unlockables into a metagame for you and your friends (or foes, as the case may be).

Since *Burnout Paradise*, it's been clear that Criterion isn't content to do repeats. And neither, it seems, is it content to deliver anything but sublime, bar-setting driving games. Genre fans have been spoiled in recent years with everything from *Blur* and *Split Second*'s arcade thrills to *Driver: San Francisco*'s experimental take on storytelling and *Ridge Racer Unbounded*'s sheer carnage. And yet, once again, Criterion still manages to stand out and offer something fresh, setting a new standard in open-world driving games with – that word again – a seamless feast of quality.

9



Much of *Hot Pursuit*'s arsenal has been stripped away, but cops still use spike strips to rob you of rubber. As a chase escalates, your pursuers get tougher, wheeling out sinister heavy vehicles



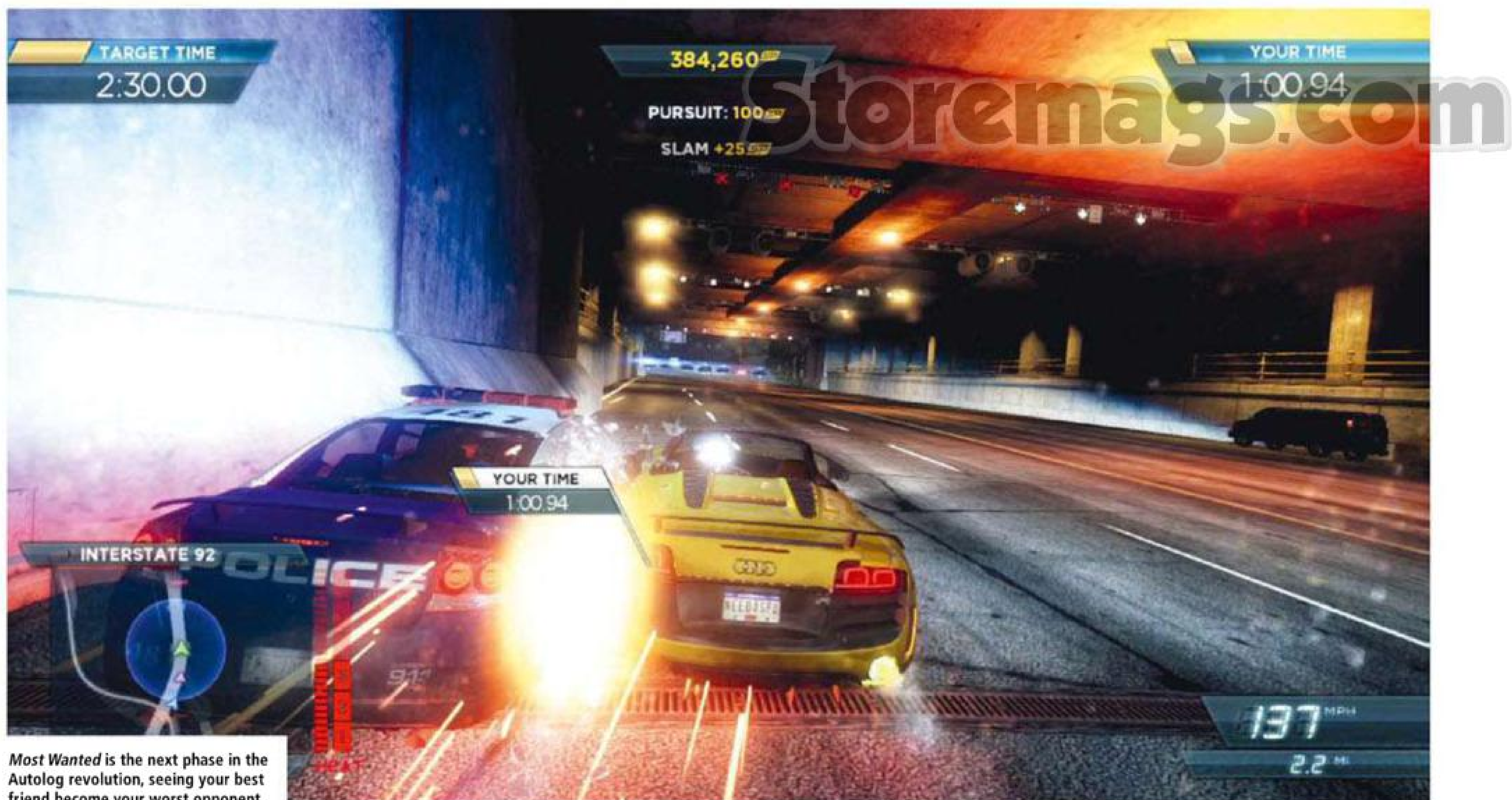
ABOVE While most certainly its own game, Criterion's *Most Wanted* takes on the name of EA Black Box's 2005 entry in the series, vastly improving on the latter's dabble with an open-world setting and car customisation





ABOVE It's not just the local terrain you need to bear in mind as you blast from location to location. Day and night cycles, along with the weather, can drastically change the rules of the road, requiring careful consideration of your loadout.

LEFT If *Hot Pursuit* was Criterion's take on World's Wildest Police Chases, *Most Wanted*, with its buffet of exotic cars waiting to be found, is Gone In 60 Seconds



Most Wanted is the next phase in the Autolog revolution, seeing your best friend become your worst opponent

Post Script

Criterion is redefining difficulty with a little help from your friends

Most Wanted offers abundant rewards for even the most casual dalliance. If a speed camera clocks you for the first time, expect Speed Points. Get a little accidental air time? Have some Speed Points. Smash a gate? Here's more Speed Points. The rewards are plentiful, and the risks are often minimal; to say Criterion is generous here is putting it lightly. All of the game's 120-odd cars are available from the get-go in no specific order, so all you have to do is find them. They're the petrolhead's equivalent of *Crackdown*'s orbs – an irresistible, continuous fetch quest. The city is wide open, too. There are no elitist sections to unlock – just drive and discover. Such an approach to reward can destroy your sense of achievement, and it's become de rigueur in recent times, perhaps since the rush to court the 'casual' market began, to rain collectibles on players whether they've earned them or not.

The genius of the challenge here is that it isn't based on traditional rewards or systems at all. Sure, there are tough time-attack races, tricky stunt challenges, wild chases through hills and the like, but the real gauntlet is your friends list. Autolog 2.0, one of the most ambitious innovations in multiplayer console gaming this generation, is a constant high score table churning away beneath the game's shiny showroom veneer. And by offering a baseline of sweeping variety in its vehicles – there's a car for every taste, from the boy racer to the cruise-control freak – Criterion lowers the barrier to entry. This explains the absence of crash cams and its ilk: such elements might prove too intricate for the newcomer.

The language of *Burnout*, therefore, has been boiled down to its most essential syllables. At a design level, this is arguably the developer's most shallow racer in some time, offering a one-size-fits-all solution to difficulty. Struggling with a challenge? Try another. Not feeling your car? Find another. If it was a singleplayer-only game, then this approach might be decried as too easy, a despicable neglect of the core fan who cut their teeth on the rock-hard challenges of *Burnout*. With Autolog involved, however, *Most Wanted* is transformed into something else entirely: a sandbox where hierarchy is based on your friends' skills. Your final boss is your most skilled friend's speed barrier or high score, and your goals can change in a second. It's a trend that's been followed by EA stablemate brands *SSX* and *FIFA*, which similarly assume you're online all the time, offering persistent worlds of scores and comparisons that are equally capable of inflating and tearing down egos.

To date, Autolog's template has been evolved by, and has made most sense within the context of, competitive sports: the race, the trick attack, the football league table. *Most Wanted* shows off the concept at its most robust and polished. It updates in seconds, and it tracks progress with precision and barely a loading stutter during even the most exhaustive showdown. As a tracking platform it's near-perfect, and you become so attached to your Most Wanted profile that it pushes Autolog into direct competition (and comparison) with the moreish qualities of 'levelling-up' your gamer profile. As such, it raises the question of when one system will rule them all. The unification of platforms has been an oft-debated topic in gaming, but the unification of our data – across games, genres, platforms – feels like another issue that should be in the spotlight.

With the rumours and rumblings of next-generation of hardware getting ever louder and more believable, Autolog has likely peaked for this cycle. The question is where it will go next. The hope is that as initiatives such as *COD Elite* and the gamification of achievements and progress become more widespread, a precedent like Autolog will become the standard, rather than merely a silo for one genre or publisher. ■

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

XCOM: Enemy Unknown generates stories like few other games. These are player-made stories, forged in turn-based battle, that you'll relay breathlessly to the unwitting stars you've created the next day. You might tell your girlfriend that she shot your boss in the chest after her best friend was eaten by a four-legged monster from beyond the stars. Or you'll find yourself informing your co-workers that, sadly, they've tested negative for the kind of latent psychic powers that would let them control someone's mind.

In short, *XCOM* will make you care. Playing as the titular organisation's commander, you're given a small squad of multinational soldiers, an alien menace to repel and a few thousand square feet of hollowed-out rock from which to do so. You're invited to mine out the latter and to fill it with facilities to aid your war effort, including laboratories that increase research speed and satellite uplinks that allow you to monitor more of the globe for UFO. The soldiers who live there are fully customisable, allowing you to change their hairstyle, armour colour, and their names. It's thanks to this that you can press-gang your friends, co-workers and even pets (or whatever else your mind can concoct) into service. But it's thanks to Firaxis' sterling pacing and combat that you'll invest in whether they live or die.

As soon as a soldier kills an alien enemy, his or her specialisation is dictated. Heavies wield machine guns, and can lay down blankets of fire; Support soldiers can heal their comrades, or provide smoke grenade cover for a retreat; Assault soldiers carry shotguns and excel when close to their foes; while Snipers fire devastating volleys the length of the screen. At the beginning of the game, facing flimsy, bulbous-headed Sectoids, players can fill their squads with whatever kind of soldier they fancy, but by the halfway point missions require serious tactical consideration, even on Normal difficulty.

XCOM's combat is consistently tense, and usually thrilling. The right move triggers a spike of euphoria. That move can be as simple as setting up a Heavy in an elevated position, setting them to 'Overwatch', and watching as they cut down an alien that moves in their field of vision. It can be as complicated as sending a Sniper in jetpack-equipped Archangel armour to the top of a building, using a Support soldier to toss a critical-hit enhancing smoke grenade, before forcing your hiding Assault class character to fire a shot at an enemy's position to flush them out into the open.

The result of a bad move is disappointment, but crucially that disappointment can't be aimed at the game. *XCOM* gives you the tools to succeed. You'll end up with a top soldier: the one who's been with you since the first mission; the one you've kitted out in the best armour, and given the best weapons to; the one who's made his way furthest down the multi-stage, branching unlock tree for his character class. If they die, it's your fault. You may have been too impatient, rushing them forward, using their two allotted actions per turn to waltz through an enemy's firing cone. Or you could have been too cautious, and the civilian rescue mission the game tasked you with has turned into the opening of a zombie movie, the very people you were sent to save now infested with alien seed and groaning their desire to devour your bones.

Publisher 2K
Developer Firaxis
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Every decision that gets made is your decision – the result of gnawing tension and the tottering balance of risk and reward

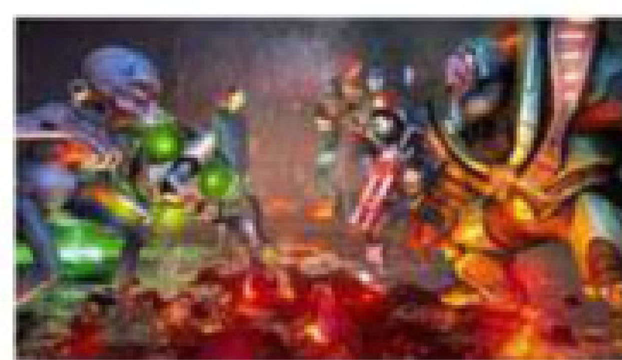
The main campaign isn't truly open-ended, and there are certain missions that you must complete in order to successfully defend the planet. But *XCOM* is masterfully paced, and every decision that gets made is your decision – the result of gnawing tension and the tottering balance of risk and reward. Early on, you'll discover a hidden alien base. You can either attack it now and hope your soldiers are ready, or hang on for a bit, using the extra time to research an extra gun, or shoot down a few UFOs and plunder their wreckage for the spoils of war and battle experience. But what if you lose a man? What if a saucer appears over one of the already-panicked parts of the globe and you can't commit the forces there, causing the country to drop out of the XCOM project? What if? Other games promise meaningful decisions. *XCOM* winks at you and promises respite from these decisions. If it came, you'd take it like water in a desert. It never comes.

Combat fatigue can set in. Bouncing back and forth from your home base to the combat screen can get mentally draining. It's as mentally draining as you'd expect the job of 'Earth's saviour' to be, really, but when you're shooting down four UFOs in as many weeks, their spooky interiors can start to feel passé.

Their decor of these ships may look the same, but their contents rarely do. Enemies quickly ramp up in scale and offensive output. Thin Men and Floaters can be knocked out in a shot or two with a mid-level laser rifle; Mutoids are vast, overmuscled monster-men who'll Bullrush your squad, then halve your poor team's health bars in a single backhand slap. Tactical demands vary considerably depending on foe and mission type, often requiring you to either save civilians or kill everything you see. That said, by the end of the game you'll have hit on a combat formula that suits, and your ragtag bunch of squaddies will likely have become a mega-armour-clad gang of elites, able to shred all but the most horrific foes with a few volleys.

But that eventuality feels like a reward. Charting a course through Earth's imminent destruction is as unashamedly difficult as it was in 1994's *X-COM*. It's possible, through bad planning and bad management, to doom the planet early on, making the game feel unfair. Get it right, however – survive the stresses of management, and the strains of aliens – and you'll feel like world's greatest hero.

9



ALIENATE YOURSELF
XCOM's multiplayer pits two players against each other, but doesn't restrict squad makeup to our species. One or both of the combatants can play using aliens, spending an agreed amount of points on up to six beings per side. It's liberating playing as the monstrosities you've been fighting, especially when deploying the Mutoid Berserker, whose Bullrush ability charges over cover to reach enemies before tearing them apart. The mode incorporates the campaign's abilities and talents, which can be highly tactical in use against a human. It's like chess, but with viscera.

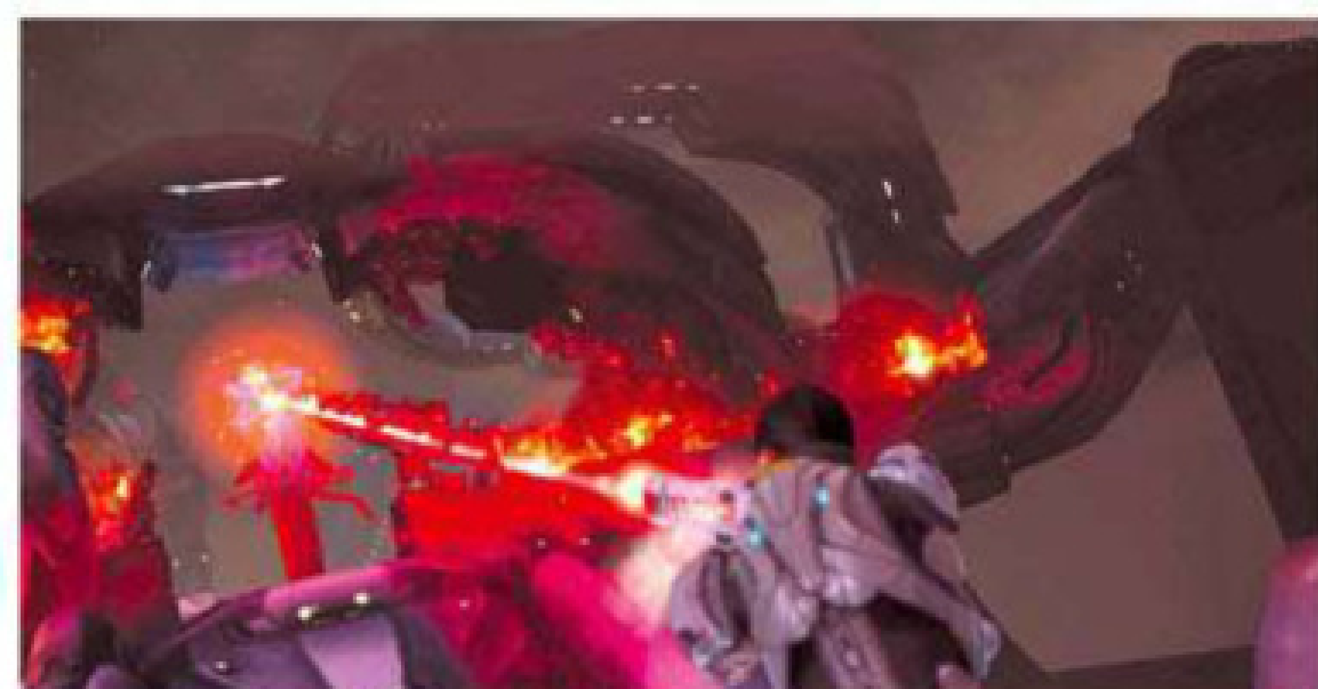


LEFT Most of *XCOM*'s cover can be destroyed. A laser rifle blast will do for a billboard, while a rocket will take out brickwork, leaving anyone standing behind it in the open. BELOW Crashed alien UFOs provide markedly different environments from the urban and woodland areas you'll be doing the brunt of your fighting in. They're full of corridors and choke points, and demand much camera swinging to let you work out sight lines. BOTTOM Later enemies can take psychic control of your soldiers. You can choose to kill the friendly, hide until the effect wears off, or slay the controller. The latter option is usually best, but canny foes will barricade themselves in a location, demanding a careful approach



RIGHT Flank enemies and they'll lose their cover bonuses, making it much easier to hit them. But your troops can be flanked by fast aliens, such as the Heavy Floater, which is able to fly around the map and land behind cover in a turn







Death doesn't have to be permanent in *XCOM*, but Ironman mode will enforce the decision to make firefights deadly

Post Script

Why a mode called Impossible is acceptable in 2012

XCOM: Enemy Unknown gives you control over your soldiers' lives. You arm, train, and direct them. Sometimes you kill them through bad planning or battlefield mismanagement. Playing on Normal mode, *XCOM* also gives you control over their afterlives. They're either dead, partially digesting inside the gloop-filled stomach of some unspeakable horror, or they're somehow brought back to life through the timeline-rearranging jiggery-pokery possible when you can reload a mid-mission save.

Play *XCOM* in Ironman mode, however, and your access to purgatory is restricted, because the option to load an earlier save is locked. In this mode, when soldiers die, they die for good. There's no resuscitation chamber: lose a squaddie, be they seasoned vet or panicky greenhorn, and you've got no way of getting them back. Ironman's designed to be coupled with *XCOM*'s other masochistic mode: the 'Impossible' difficulty setting.

This is *XCOM* at its hardest. Vast armies of enemies come for your squad, and they rarely miss. It feels unfair. Even on Normal difficulty, it's possible to hamstring yourself so spectacularly that you're unable to make progress; on Impossible, it's difficult not to.

To play *XCOM* in both Ironman and Impossible modes requires near-robotic levels of gaming perfection. The experience is markedly close to playing the original *X-COM*, being callous, harsh and unfairly difficult. But that game's 1994 release date explains its sheer learning curve. Back then, quality assurance was handled by individuals, not departments, plus there were no betas and thus little feedback. Why does 2012's *XCOM* think it can get away with the same challenge in an age in which players are conditioned to expect a shower of rewarding numbers when they complete the simplest of tasks?

XCOM's not alone in demanding a lot from its players, though. A recent wave of games have catered for the dedicated, offering hyper-difficulty in exchange for a sensation of total mastery. *Super Hexagon* delights in forcing you back to the menu screen, and successful sessions are measured in seconds, not hours. *Arma 2* mod *DayZ* throws players into a zombie-infested world and proudly displays their average life expectancy on its website, which is the time it takes for someone to enter the bleak world of Chernarus, find food, shelter, and weaponry, before losing it all again and having to start over. At the time of writing, that life expectancy stands at one hour and eight minutes.

These games invite the player in before kicking open the trapdoor, nonchalantly thumbing towards the yawning depths below. *Dark Souls* won't even let players into the house unless they're committed to plumbing those depths. So many will have seen the innards of that game's Undead Asylum and nothing further, having careened off its steep difficulty curve. *Super Meat Boy* and *DustForce* are indie platformers a world away from From Software's 3D world, but just as excruciatingly tough, just as complex and often as harsh.

Conventional publisher wisdom would say these games should fail. They're too spiky for players. But each example here, from *Super Hexagon*'s one-button wireframe nightmare to *Dark Souls'* expansive world, has become a cultural phenomenon. Each has been a critical darling, but crucially, they've also gained a grip on the minds of the gaming public.

XCOM has learned its lessons well. They're lessons taught by recent successes, but also ones remembered from the old days – lessons once planned and set out by *XCOM* Jr's grand forbearer itself. They show that players want to feel powerful. We already knew that, but where other games bow down and hand power over at the press of a button, games like *XCOM* are willing to make you work for it. And in *XCOM*, as in its super-hard peers, the reward at the end of all that work tastes all the sweeter. ■

Torchlight II

Publisher Runic Games
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

The first *Torchlight* arrived almost a decade after the release of *Diablo II*, falling in something of a dry spell for the dungeon-crawler. Its single-town, single-dungeon structure mirrored *Diablo*, proving that an indie studio, albeit one made up of ex-Blizzard developers, was capable of executing and improving upon the ideas that outlined a genre.

Torchlight II arrives in a different climate, but the values behind it haven't changed, for better or worse. These days, the action-RPG has found a home among the darlings of crowdfunding platforms, while *Diablo III*'s radical recalibrations and controversial auction house metagame have formed the basis of an ongoing exchange between Blizzard and its community.

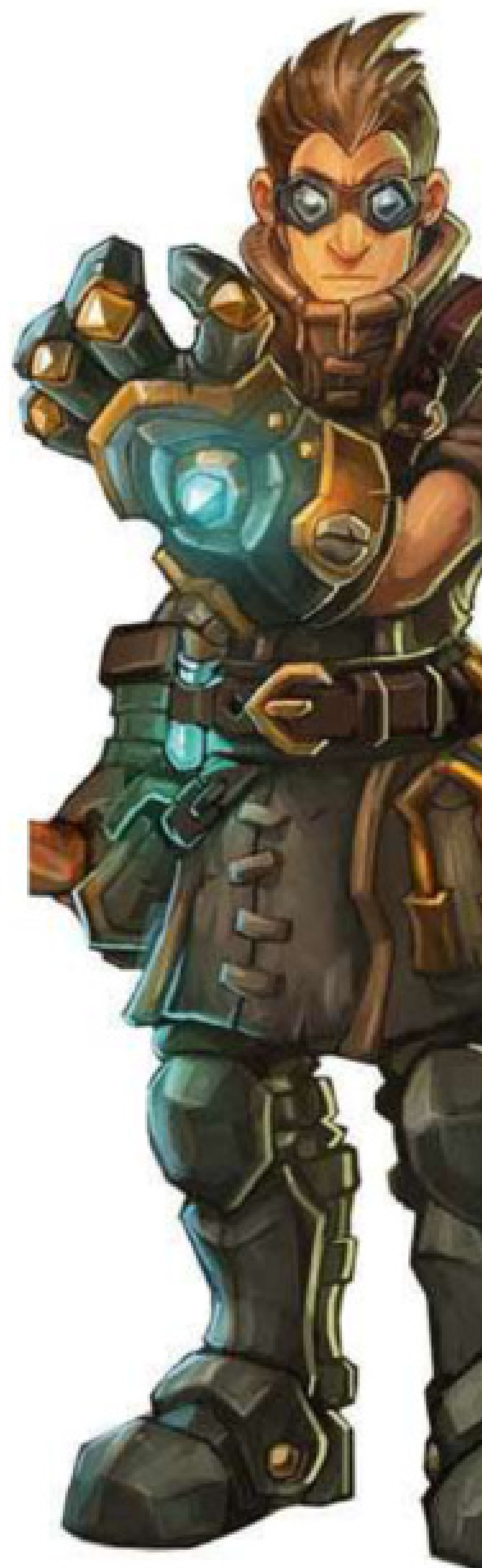
Torchlight II feels remarkably separate from what has happened to its genre in the last year, though. It comes across primarily like a tribute to *Diablo II* by way of its own predecessor, influences that ground it in the values of PC gaming circa 2001. One headline change over the original is that you needn't face this adventure alone, with support for six-player online co-op. It's a natural inclusion, and the four classes – the spellcasting Embermage, nimble Outlander, gadget-loving Engineer, and feral Berserker – prove complementary when thrown together on the field of battle.

Whichever character you pick, and whether you use them with friends or solo, your task is to pursue the game's villain across three acts that reflect the plot and environmental progression of *Diablo II*. The journey isn't always the same, though, with both the indoor and outdoor environments randomised for every new campaign, although the number of dungeons stays fixed. Additional maps are accessible from a dungeon selection hub after you complete the campaign, and there's a New Game Plus mode, all in the service of propelling your chosen hero up the item-gathering, monster-farming ascent to level 100.

As in the original, you're also accompanied by a pet, which you choose and name during character creation. *Torchlight II* expands the range of animals to pick from significantly, offering up wolves, cats, hawks, panthers, bulldogs, a papillon, and even a ferret wearing aviator goggles. The ability to send your pets to town to sell your gear returns as well, and this has been augmented with a Shopping List feature that enables you to request a fresh stack of health potions or item identification scrolls while they're at it.

This kind of delightful absurdity is one of the ways that *Torchlight II* stands out, but it also highlights an approach to problem solving that typifies the game as a whole. Limited inventory space and unidentified items have always been a double-edged means of enforcing the pace of an action-RPG, slowing us down with inconvenience and a reliance on trivial items – particularly town portal scrolls – that add nothing in terms of choice, but act as a check and balance to your gold and progress levels.

There's a real satisfaction to building an efficient monster-hunting machine after the skill system starts to click



Diablo III took a scalpel to this system, placing identification and town portals on a cooldown, and excising the player resource angle entirely. *Torchlight II* does the opposite, stacking additional mechanics – pets, enchanter NPCs in dungeons to augment your weapons, items that are identified when you level up – on top of an already wobbly pile. The result is charming but sometimes inelegant, and it's not the only area of the game where that sentiment crops up.

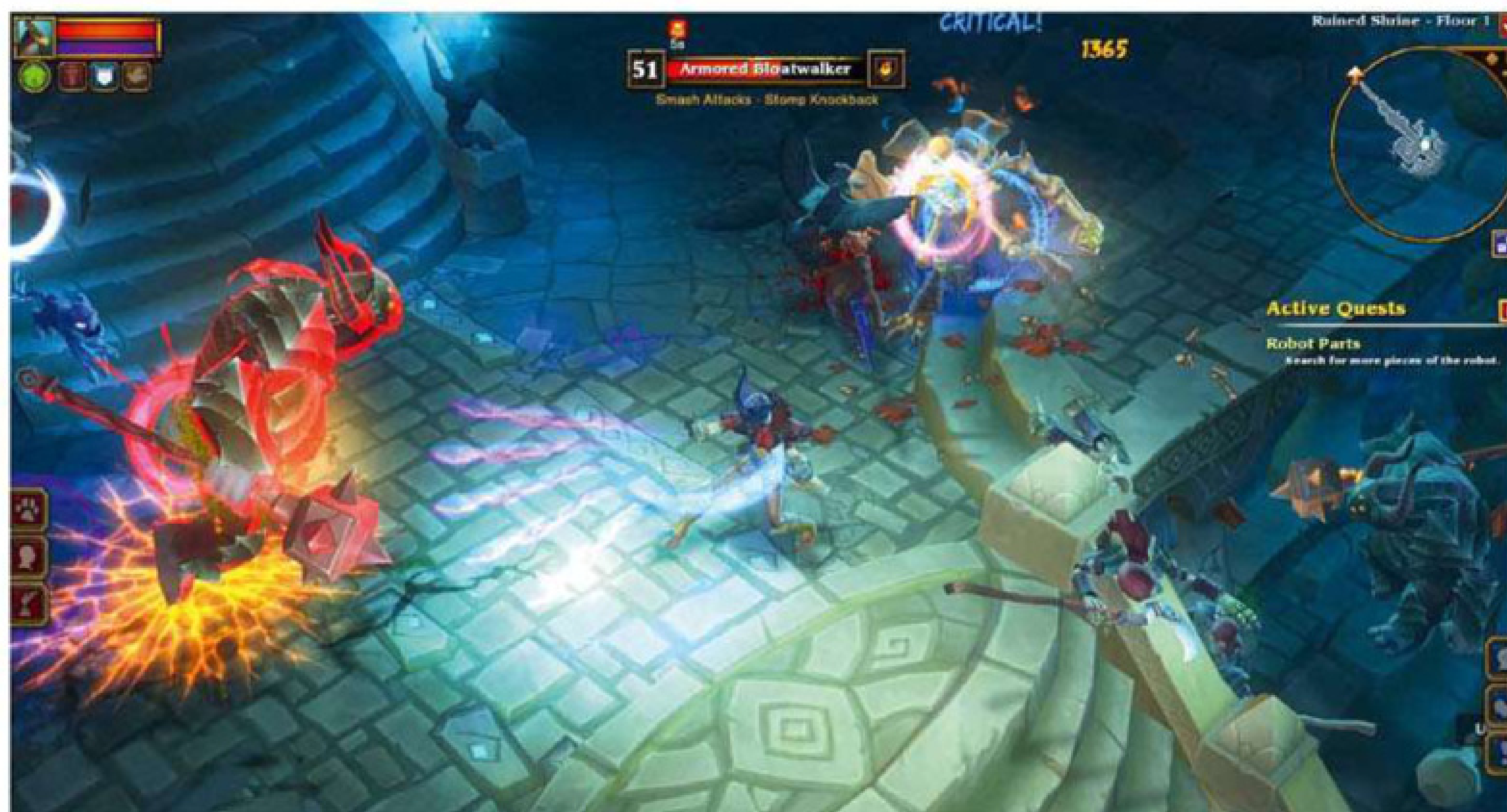
Characters are customised by boosting certain attributes, namely Strength, Dexterity, Focus and Vitality, and your stats determine whether the majority of your damage will come from your equipped weapons or magic abilities. This in turn influences the decisions to be made within each of the classes' skill trees. The original *Torchlight*'s skill system has been opened up in this sequel, removing the need to invest in low-level abilities before later ones can be chosen. They're now simply tied to your character level, allowing for a greater degree of choice and variety.

An NPC in each hub town can undo up to three recent skill decisions for a fee, but it's difficult to reconfigure a character when a direction has been chosen, particularly because your stat choices can't be altered. As with *Diablo II*, then, sampling a different playstyle for the same class means either investing time into building a new character, or using console commands or mods to grant a respec. That *Torchlight II* supports the latter is welcome in an industry that's increasingly unwilling to give players meaningful control over their games, but ideally it would be possible to have that freedom without needing it.

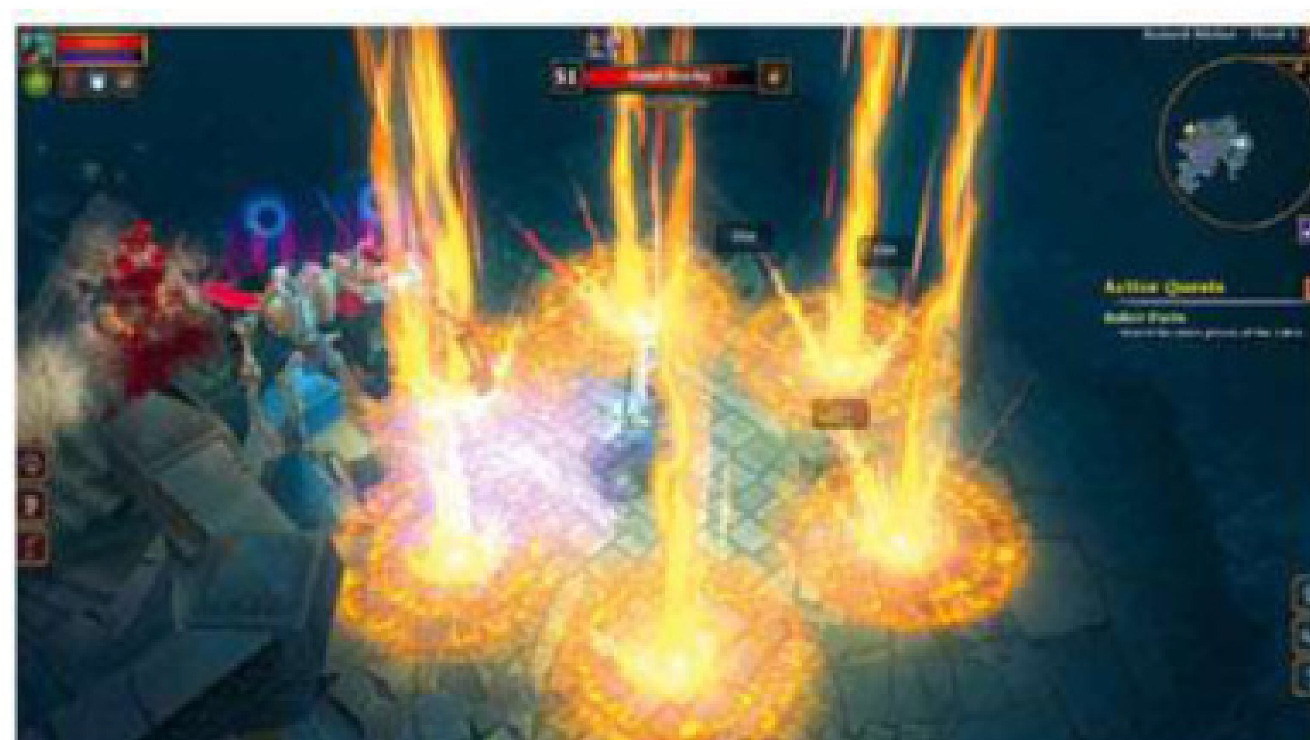
Still, *Torchlight II* excels in the areas that matter most: itemisation and combat. The latter starts slowly, but there's a real satisfaction to building an efficient, self-sustaining monster-hunting machine after the skill system begins to click. There's also a Charge bar that, when filled, grants you a class-specific power boost, periodically injecting dungeon clearance with energy and spectacle. Likewise, *Torchlight II*'s loot tables deliver a constant stream of upgrades and surprises, from unique equipment to weapons that level up, fire custom projectiles or change the way other systems, such as spells or the Charge bar, function.

You'll get the most out of *Torchlight II* if you're looking to ride the curve of loot and incremental power, and to share in a community that is emerging as the game's mechanics are mastered and its rarest items are uncovered. It makes no spectacular breaks from the past, but it does reclaim the mood – if not the tone – of *Diablo II*. It's living proof that the values of 2001 still have worth over a decade later.

8

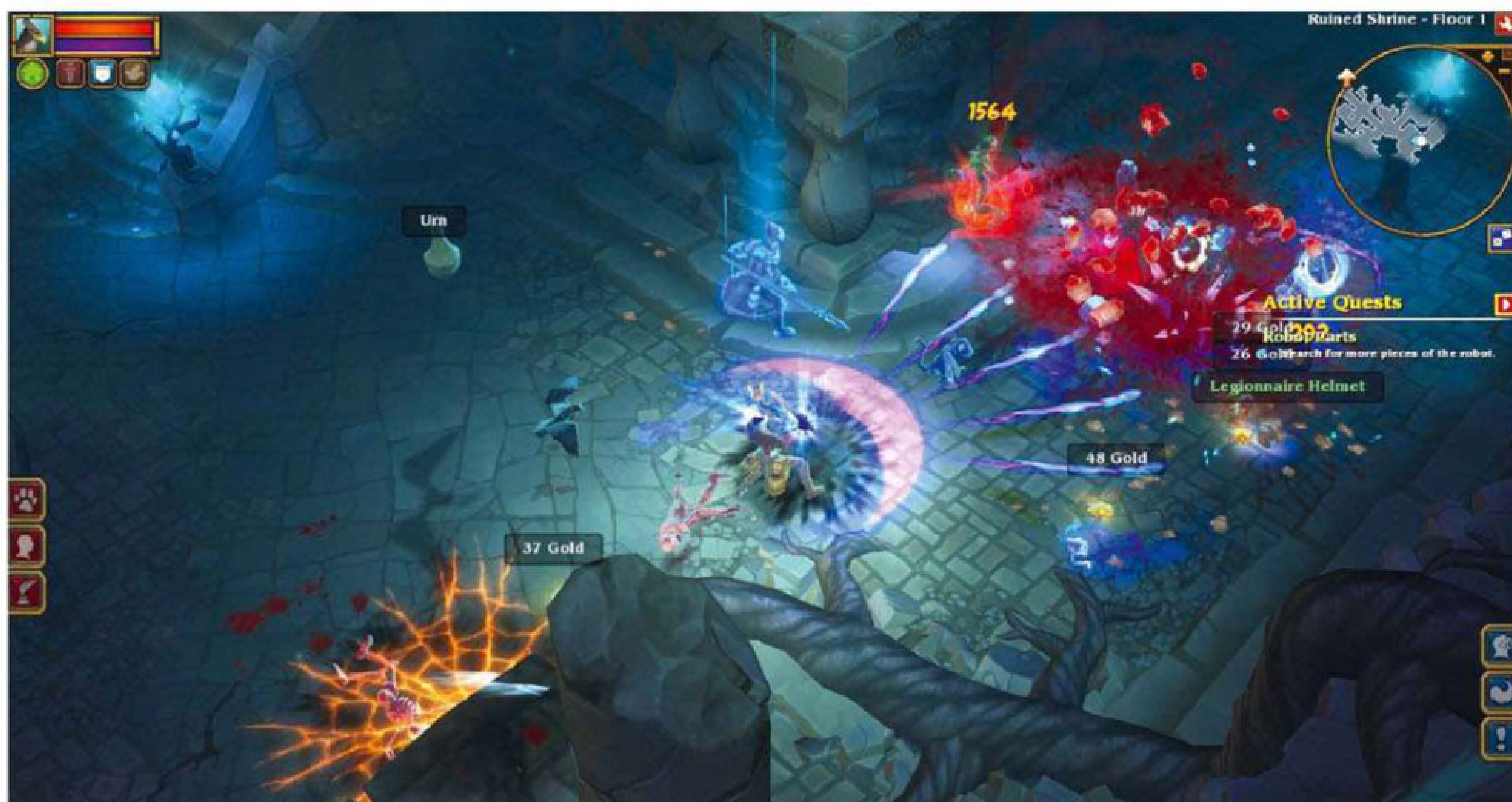


LEFT The game retains its toy box lightheartedness throughout. The story itself is readily disposable fare, but there's a great deal of character to the design and animation of each monster. **BELOW** *Torchlight II* supports up to six players and scales encounter difficulty appropriately. There's full LAN support, but online play requires a Runic Games account. **BOTTOM** The various classes offer different takes on survival. Embermages and Berserkers can drain health as they deal damage, while Engineers specialise in defence and Outlanders have the mobility to evade attacks



ABOVE Hidden side-quests and Easter eggs abound in *Torchlight II*. There's a tremendous amount for you to find, even within the confines of the game's 10-hour campaign. Some quests stretch across all three acts, too





New Little King's Story

Konami's portable take on Cing's delightful RTS-RPG hybrid is, rather misleadingly given the title, more remake than sequel. Purporting to follow on from the first game, its bosses, foes and structure are broadly the same, while its tutorial rather confusingly invites players to recall having accomplished similar objectives before. It's a curious mix of old and new, and suffers from something of an identity crisis as a result.

The most immediately obvious change is the loss of the Wii game's impressionistic aesthetic, eschewing it for something a little sharper, if less individualistic. Still, the beguiling bucolic setting and the inhabitants of your kingdom are almost as charmingly drawn as ever. A pity, then, that dialogue sequences blot the copybook, arriving accompanied by some generic 2D art. The script, meanwhile, is at its best when riffing on or lifting from the original, and it's a little too keen to spell out themes that were subtly alluded to before.

Otherwise, things are much as they were. Shorn of the thrill of the new, *New Little King's Story*'s quirks – the clumsy pathfinding of your followers, the capricious aiming line – are harder to forgive. Fortunately, lots of good aspects remain intact, too. The *Pikmin*-like battles may seem unrefined at times, but there's a fine art to manoeuvring your conga line of followers, and genuine strategy in managing the makeup of your Royal Guard. Take a phalanx of knights and you can't dig holes or build bridges, but too many carpenters and farmers will reduce the combat efficacy of your group.

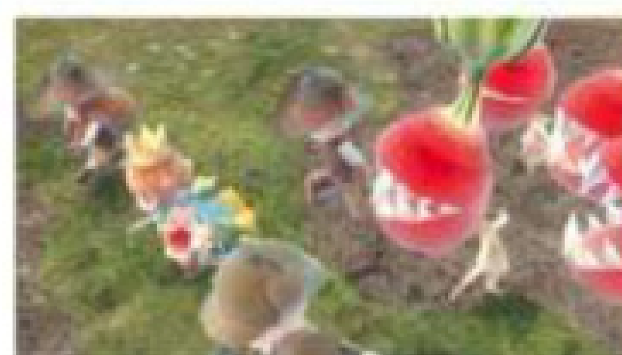
The highlights continue: the outlandish, inventive bosses, here sensibly scaled back in size to fit a smaller screen; the ticker tape festivals held after each major triumph; the bulging cow cannons that allow you to quickly traverse your expanding kingdom. Running around your treasure room, triggering chimes and floating golden notes with every jab of the X button, is every bit the guilty pleasure it was on Wii.

Konami has also supplied a clutch of intelligent additions. There's a wider range of weapons and outfits, and a resident alchemist who creates potions from the detritus you collect. You can select a princess you've rescued to tag along on your daily outings, with each providing a different support skill. The already plentiful side-quests, meanwhile, are bolstered by a series of combat-based challenge missions with leaderboards.

New Little King's Story may not have survived the porting process unscathed, then, but it's still an easy recommendation to newcomers. Those lucky enough to have experienced the first game may find the familiarity frustrating, but otherwise this is an efficient, if sometimes less flavoursome, rendition.

7

Publisher Konami
Developer In-house
Format Vita
Release Out now



PETITE MORT
Little King's Story had many light-hearted touches, but these were juxtaposed with a sense of creeping dread as the game reached its climax, and a rare streak of mordant wit. There's precious little darkness in this version. Indeed, death is out – should your subjects fall in battle, you'll now find them recouping in hospital the next morning. This has the unwanted side effect of turning death from an emotional moment into a mere minor inconvenience.

BELOW **Standard Onii are easily dispatched, but later variants can punish careless charges. For that reason a small team of hunters is an essential component of your Royal Guard, letting you attack from a safe distance**



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Professor Layton And The Miracle Mask

Professor Layton and the winter sequel rush make unusual bedfellows. While other yearly iterations bolster stable foundations with shouty new functionality, Layton ambles along at the pace set in his debut. But what once seemed charmingly measured has begun to develop hints of laziness. Last year's *Spectre's Call* in particular felt like a clumsy amalgamation of previous entries, with its chart success speaking more of quaint familiarity than innate quality. Layton's games have become comfort (brain) food, and this will not do.

His first 3DS outing provides an opportunity for reinvention. On a purely presentational level, the hardware coaxes great work from Level-5's artists. The series' illustrations are elegantly realised in 3D, an attractive hybrid of Belleville Rendez-vous' potato-faced caricatures and Pixar's smooth mannequins.

Static backgrounds are demolished, too, replaced with dioramas. Presented in stereoscopic 3D, they conjure further depth by tilting and turning as you scan them with Layton's magnifying glass, giving the impression of a shoebox theatre hiding incidental details in the wings. Adopting the touchscreen as an impromptu trackpad for the magnifying cursor up top is a smart touch, too, reconciling the disparate screens.

BELOW While difficulty is clearly subjective where puzzles are concerned, *Miracle Mask* does seem easier than past entries. Perhaps this is intended to welcome newcomers, or perhaps puzzle master Akira Tago is going soft

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Level-5
Format 3DS
Release Out now (Japan), October 26 (EU), October 28 (US)



OH, YOUNG MAN
Over five games and a movie, Level-5 has carefully built the cult of Layton. Having started as a puzzle-spouting exposition machine, he's evolved into a sword-fighting, tea-slurping badass. *Miracle Mask* develops the persona further with some flashbacks to his teenage years. Spending time with the then-puzzle-averse wastrel is akin to Marty McFly meeting his folks in Back To The Future. And what *Layton* fanatic wouldn't want to meet Hershel's parents?

If only riddles translated as well into 3D. Many require careful penmanship, whether sliding blocks around a cage or scribbling down notes, which would be impossible on the 3DS's upper screen. With interaction thus relegated to the screen below, the upper panel has little more to do than display 3D illustrations. Worse, these images take the space occupied in past games by puzzle instructions, asking players to consult a pop-up box when they need to refresh their objective.

Those puzzles that do rely on 3D visuals come across as simplistic; guiding a ladybird along a rotating corncob is hardly Mensa-grade stuff. The general lack of ambition seems particularly odd in the light of a portion of the game that uproots Layton from his point-and-click template and drops him into a 3D labyrinth. Here, puzzles weave organically into the environment as Layton leads mummies into traps and shunts boulders over pits. It's a burst of innovation that's over too soon.

Not that the remaining puzzles are lacking by series standards. There's little repetition from old games, and a generous selection as well. On top of the story's 150 brain teasers, Level-5 has prepared daily DLC for a year. Fundamentally, it's hard to bare a grudge against a game with such generosity of spirit and pleasant delivery. But having tangled with mythical sea beasts and alternate Londons, isn't it time for Layton to solve the greatest mystery of all: where does he go next?

7



FTL: Faster Than Light

Bursts of laser fire come crackling across the void, thudding into our shields. They flare but hold, and we relax. This battle is all but over – our opponent's engines and shield control are glowing red, ruined by our beam weapons. Then a missile careens into our hull, taking out door control. We'd scoff, but the words die on our lips as a fire breaks out in the room. You see, the best way to put out destructive flames is to flush air from affected areas by opening the airlocks and exposing rooms to the vacuum outside. It's what door control exists – or rather existed – for. So we send our battered crew in to extinguish it by hand. One by one, they die in the rampant blaze. Game over.

That's how quickly a game of *FTL* can turn on you, fully justifying its 'Roguelike-like' classification. It's also how quickly it can generate stories of valour, quick thinking, bad luck and overcoming dire odds. Your perspective on all this drama is from the captain's chair of a ship on the run from rebel forces, your domain spanning just a few rooms, and a power system that looks complex but proves sublimely easy to use. As you hop from point to point and system to system on the way back to your fleet, you'll encounter text-based events – rescue a stranded vessel, save a colony from alien spiders – and make hard choices in the pursuit of the gear you'll need to survive your voyage.

Along the way, you'll not so much ignore the Prime Directive as leave advanced weaponry embedded in its smouldering corpse. The game's races (each represented by well-drawn sprites) are a fractious bunch, ready to singe your hull at the slightest provocation. Thankfully, what Subset Games understands is that great space combat is a delicate balancing act, not one pyrotechnic broadside after another. Critical systems, power, fires, and hull breaches – all must be managed as you attempt to cripple an enemy vessel or just jump away to safety.

Like *Spelunky* before it, survival often depends on what you're carrying, and when you happen across life-prolonging shops and lucky weapon drops. But *FTL* is a less masterful game than Derek Yu's cave diver, throwing more chance into the mix. While *Spelunky* almost always offers the opportunity to overcome bad luck with skill, *FTL* can occasionally feel punishing, allowing you to limp from one harsh fight directly into another. Its text-based events are a double-edged sword, too: they entice with their talk of alien worlds, but cabin fever sets in when you realise you're confined to quarters and the missions start to repeat after a few hours. We'd love to join our crew on their adventures, and to see more events added to prolong *FTL*'s captivating core play. Make it so, Subset Games.

7

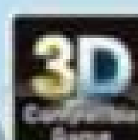
Publisher Subset Games
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC
Release Out now



HUNK OF JUNK
Scrap is the currency of *FTL*, upgrading your systems, buying new crew to replace those killed in action, and augmenting your ship with drones, teleporters and more. Shops are randomly scattered about systems, but power upgrades can be made at any time out of combat, which leads to powerful choices about when to spend and when to save. Scrap's not too hard to come by – most events pay out in junk – but you'll be burning precious fuel to scour for it.



Drones are powerful assistants and come in an array of guises, from ship-bound repair bots to attack models that help you defeat enemies. An antipersonnel machine would be handy for repelling these invaders





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Rayman Jungle Run

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Pasta Games
Format iOS (version tested), Android
Release Out now

The best moments in last year's *Rayman Origins* were the stages in which our limbless hero hared off at full pelt after a surprisingly speedy treasure chest. They showed the genre at its rhythmic best, an immaculate blend of memory test and precision platforming. The only downside was that there weren't enough of them. With *Rayman Jungle Run*, Ubisoft has not only set that straight but made perhaps the most convincing case for asset reuse we've seen in years.

In hindsight, a smartphone auto-runner spin-off making use of *Origins*' painterly visuals is such an obvious proposition that the cynical mind would be forgiven for suspecting it was in the *Origins* design document from the start. Developer Pasta Games does, however, deviate from the auto-runner template by abandoning the endless left-to-right of *Canabalt* and its ilk: if the level design requires you to run left, you'll run left.

The levels here are every bit as inventive as they were in *Origins* and, by the time your moveset has expanded to include a hover, wall-run and punch, every bit as punishing. Your cause isn't helped by some flakey input recognition – especially the hover, which often requires several taps to kick in.

While most players will blitz through the main game's 36 levels in a couple of hours, there's longevity in collecting all of the firefly-like Lums in a stage. The App Store hardly lacks platform games, of course, but few are so finely executed, so close in spirit to their 16bit forebears, as this.

8



The Room

Publisher Fireproof Studios
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

The haunting music and mysteriously ajar door that make up *The Room*'s title screen might hint at supernatural adventure, but get past the spooky atmosphere enveloping this iOS puzzler and you'll find a game more interested in the physical than the ethereal.

A series of locked-box puzzles, *The Room* presents players with a procession of ornate containers studded with strange panels and riddled with arcane mechanisms. You interact with these chests exclusively through gestures, tapping to zoom in, pinching to zoom back out, and swiping to slide drawers and spin dials.

Figuring out the purpose of these components requires logic, spatial reasoning and pattern-spotting skills. But, barring some untelegraphed use of the tilt sensor, the controls make simple, intuitive sense throughout, and bring a near-tactile life to Fireproof's polished and lacquered models.

What Fireproof has done, in other words, is to wrap the mechanics of a point-and-click adventure around these fantastical contraptions, before suffusing the experience with an air of ghostly mystery. Narrative is delivered in the form of letters found within the boxes (as well as a few unexpected means) and there's a genuine sense, as you work your way to centre of one box to find another chest within it, of heading towards some great revelation. It never comes – this is merely *The Room*'s first chapter – but that doesn't offset the pleasure of working towards it.

8



Bad Piggies

Publisher Rovio Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format iOS (version tested), PC, Android, Mac
Release Out now

After the underwhelming response to *Amazing Alex*, it's hard to blame Rovio for returning to the brand that made its fortune. Yet if *Bad Piggies* sees the Finnish studio playing it safe in some respects, it's a markedly different kind of iOS physics puzzler, one that owes more to *Banjo Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* than its avian inspiration.

As with Rare's 360 curio, your job is to build vehicles to achieve a variety of objectives, but this time with the de facto three gold stars as your reward for negotiating the ramps, rocks and other obstacles that lie between the start and finish lines. The grid-based vehicle construction is intuitive as you snap wheels, propellers, wings and springs onto the wooden pallets carrying your porcine cargo, and while there's plenty of trial and error involved in creating a vehicle fit for purpose, there's a healthy element of slapstick to compensate. By the time TNT crates are introduced as a method of propulsion rather than a hazard, the results are mildly redolent of Wile E Coyote's elaborate Acme failures.

Sadly, the early learning curve is too shallow, while creative freedom is often illusory, with a single solution to many stages. Rovio does eventually loosen the reins, but the combination of rickety vehicles and unforgiving level design only heightens the frustration. A clutch of entertaining sandbox challenges is too little, too late: like a bottle-rocket-powered unicycle, *Bad Piggies* begins with a fizzing burst of promise before losing momentum and collapsing.

6



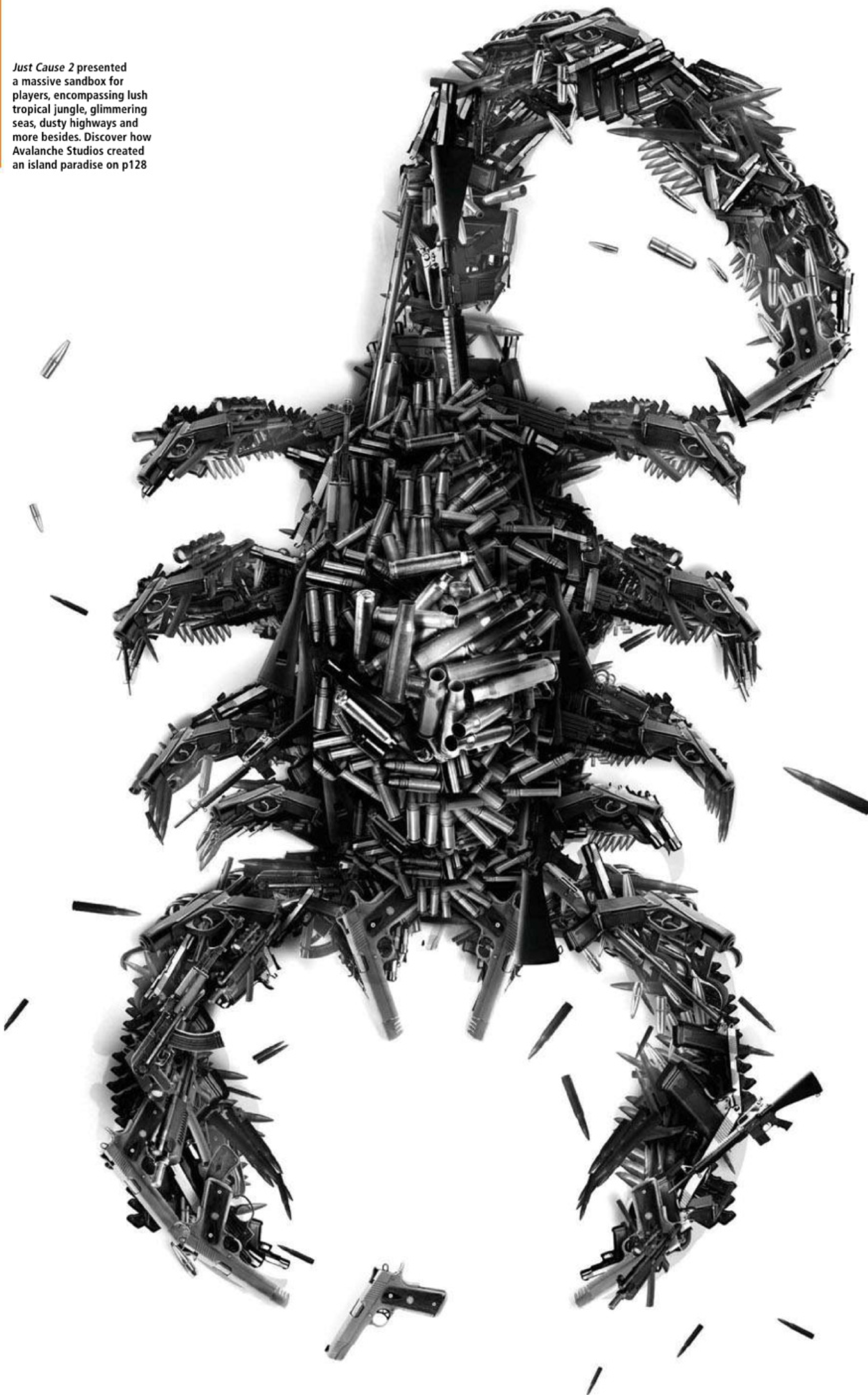
create

Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

Are you there, Zach? Because this issue's People, Places, Things is getting underway on p118. There we talk to *Deadly Premonition* creator Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro, who explains how his upbringing in a Buddhist monastery has influenced his approach to design. We then indulge our taste for the finer things with a macabre visit to *Hitman: Blood Money*'s Paris Opera House on p120, a place where play and performance sadistically intersect. On p122, Things takes a look at the way *Rage*'s signature weapon, the Wingstick, satisfyingly breaks the rules of a conventional firstperson shooter. In this issue's The Making Of... on p124, we enter the permanent night of *Arkham City*, and find out how Rocksteady fashioned its distinctive take on the Dark Knight's lore. The Art Of... on p128 celebrates the sun-soaked hyper-realism of Avalanche's *Just Cause 2*, a game whose island setting offered 32 square kilometres of tropical paradise to explore. As ever, it's the Create columnists who have final say, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p132) wondering whether it really is about time games should take their place alongside other media industries, while Valve's Clint Hocking (p134) asks whether we should we consider the language used when we say we've 'beaten' a game. Randy Smith (p136) shares his experience of submitting *Waking Mars* for Greenlight approval, and writer James Leach (p138) makes the case that games are squandering the opportunity to explore weirder, wackier themes.



Just Cause 2 presented a massive sandbox for players, encompassing lush tropical jungle, glimmering seas, dusty highways and more besides. Discover how Avalanche Studios created an island paradise on p128



People

HIDETAKA 'SWERY' SUEHIRO

The Deadly Premonition mastermind walks a line between monastery and mainstream



Monk or game maker? Swery's own life is as rich and filled with fascinating detail as the worlds he fabricates. You'd expect no less from the mind behind *Deadly Premonition*

Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro's games are certainly talkative. From *Spy Fiction*'s movie-inspired banter to *Deadly Premonition*'s Lynchian language and beats, Swery's games are as much about motivation and character as action and intrigue. It's an element that you can trace back to the game creator's roots, where a fascination for people was nurtured in some unconventional surroundings. "Being brought up in a Japanese temple, there were always lots of people coming and going," he explains. "People of all ages. I had the opportunity to meet lots of people, talk to lots of people, be influenced and absorb all of those influences. It had a major effect on me. Also, [my upbringing] was quite strict with regard to laws and manners and things like that, so possibly when I'm thinking of the rules within games, I'm thinking back to that."

Swery was born in Osaka, Japan, to a Buddhist monk family. To this day, they wish he'd give up the games and follow their lead. "We do fall out about it," he says after a moment of silence. "But they brought me up and… We have to get on. I have to get on with them, so I'm thinking about what I should do."

It sounds like the life of a monk may still be very much on Swery's agenda as he mentions wondering "if it would be interesting to make games as a monk. My current style is to have lots of people dying, sad things, but I wouldn't be able to do that. I'd have to come up with something different. So maybe as a monk developer, you'd shoot someone, they'd die, but turn into butterflies and fly away."

A fan-favourite game developer toying – or wrestling – with the idea of turning to the monastic life as his star rises sounds strange. Then again, strangeness is something Swery strives for in his work. It's his creative currency. "It's deliberate. Because it takes so much time, effort and money to create a game if you don't do it deliberately, there's a risk [the game will] end up being something normal. It's quite scary trying to put it in there when all that is at stake, but even so I try to get it in there."

An aversion to normality, to the expected, is the through-line of both Swery's own life, balancing success and the solemn roots of his family background, and his body of work. The duality of his persona – part company man, part avant-garde artist – is reflected most overtly in *Deadly Premonition*'s split-personality investigator Francis York Morgan as he scours the eerie hills and houses of fictional American town Greenvale. (Tellingly, the murderous villain of the piece is draped in a red, monk-like robe, but the meaning of that is a debate perhaps best left for a psychiatrist's couch).

Having moved away from the Buddhist monk lifestyle as a youth, Swery attended the Osaka University Of Arts to study film. Unsurprisingly for a young man so enamoured and nurtured by human interaction, it was its hands-on, practical filmmaking sessions that he took to most enthusiastically, thriving on the interplay of group-based work. Regardless of Swery's feverish love for film (his favourite movie is Terry Gilliam's seminal socio-political parable Brazil for its odd but affecting dystopian world-building) the medium was lacking a special something. "I felt there was a lack of interaction in film," he says. "So I was more interested in games, which is why I applied to a game company [for work]. Actually, towards the end of university I didn't have much to do with film; I spent pretty much every day fishing."

Anyone who's taken a detour in Greenvale will know fishing has a special place among *Deadly Premonition*'s minigames. Once again, we find Swery's life intersecting with, and permeating, his art. "When I heard the news from SNK, I was out in a little rubber dingy fishing, and they called me and told me I got the job. I was surprised."

"Towards the end of university, I didn't have much to do with film; I spent pretty much every day fishing"

A glance at Swery's original job application for the role might surprise you, too. When he filled out this form for his first industry job, Swery was already showing his rebellious-yet-creative side: "I remember putting a cross in both the male and female boxes on my form [and] writing in my own Chinese character, which means manly and brave, in the gender section."

Indeed gender – specifically cross-dressing – is another central aspect of *Deadly Premonition*'s twisted tale, and as you learn more about Swery, you clearly learn more about that game's rich pool of ideas and interweaving themes.

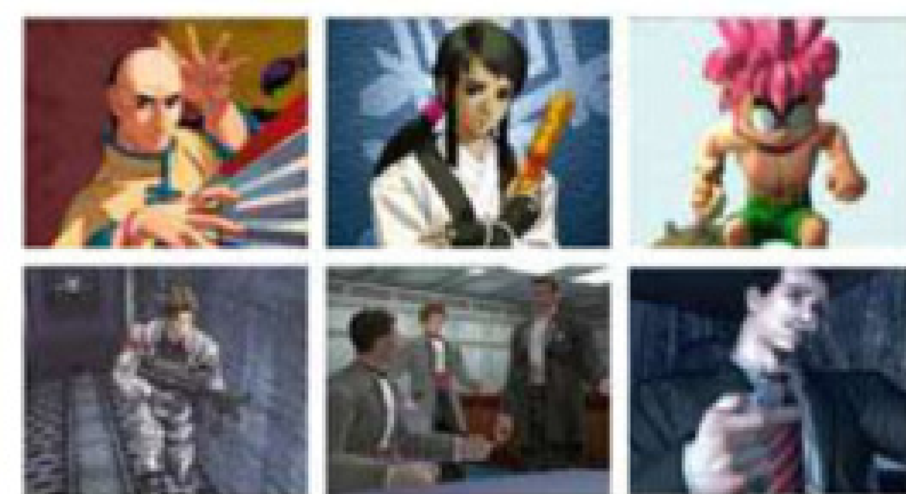
Life after SNK, where Swery cut his teeth on Neo Geo fighting games *The Last Blade* and its sequel, lead him to Sony subsidiary Deep Space. Here he would work relentlessly for the next eight months on survival-horror title *Extermination* ("It was really tough" is the terse response he gives when asked for his impression of the experience). As a writer and planner on *Extermination*, Swery could inject a little more of his own imagination into the project, and there are early signs of the work that would follow in its bleak outlook and horror theme. But still he craved more control over the creative process. "I really wanted to direct a game," he says, "and there were some people around me, colleagues, who felt the same way. I also wanted to create something for the rest of the world, something global. Again, there were people who agreed with that and wanted to support me, co-operate on that, and so we started Access Games to make that dream come true."

Access Games, now celebrating its tenth year, finally gave Swery the creative freedom he desired. It allowed him to direct and design titles such as *Spy Fiction*, *Deadly Premonition* and *Lord Of Apocalypse*. After Swery's very grounded beginnings, his status as a cult creator came as a shock. "The first time I felt that users, players, were really liking my work was a Saturday morning. I was messing about with Twitter, which I did with about five friends every day, and I woke up that Saturday morning and all of a sudden I had 160 followers, [who appeared] overnight. I thought my account had been hacked. It was all in English, and up until then I'd only been tweeting in Japanese. I thought it was all spam until I started reading it and realised it was about *Deadly Premonition*. That's when I realised that people like it."

The unexpected taste of fame hasn't soured the auteur at all. When we suggest his name on the Japanese game industry landscape now shares company with the likes of Hideo Kojima, the man who may or may not become a monk can't help crack a smile. "I'm nowhere near as big as Kojima," he says, "but that's something I'm going to aim for." ■

CV

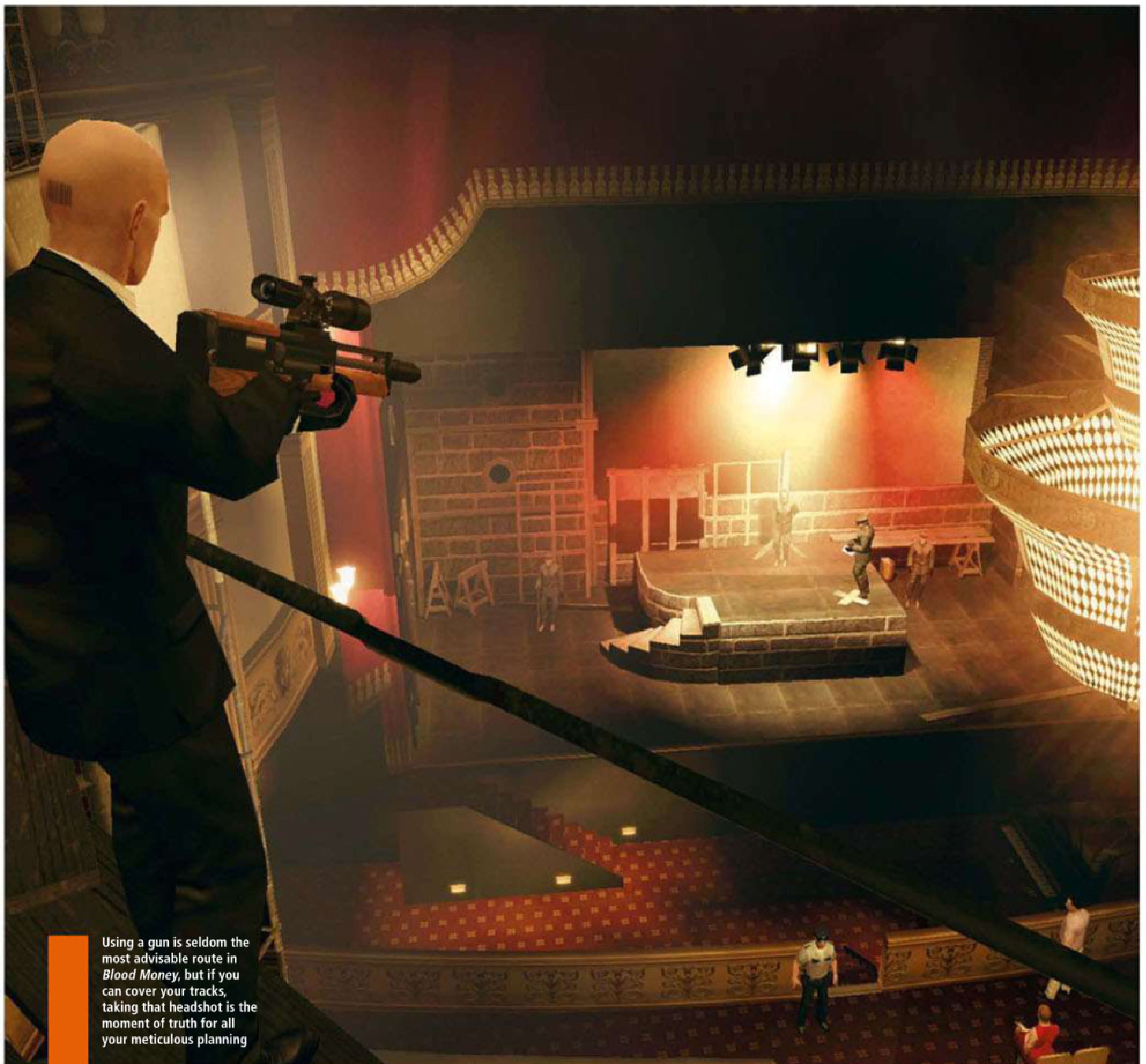
URL www.accessgames.co.jp
Softography *The Last Blade* (1997), *The Last Blade 2: Heart Of The Samurai* (1998), *Tomba! 2: The Evil Swine Return* (1999), *Extermination* (2001), *Spy Fiction* (2004), *Deadly Premonition* (2010)



Places

THE PARIS OPERA

Setting the stage for Hitman: Blood Money's mortality play



Using a gun is seldom the most advisable route in *Blood Money*, but if you can cover your tracks, taking that headshot is the moment of truth for all your meticulous planning

From *Hitman: Blood Money*
Developer IO Interactive
Origin Denmark
Debut 2006

Where many open-world action games are akin to sandboxes, *Hitman: Blood Money* is perhaps best viewed as a series of toy boxes. Each level is relatively small in scale, its parameters easily defined, but the possibilities for inventive play are numerous. The game offers several testing grounds for crazy assassination ideas, whether that's working out the ones the developers have designed and signposted, playing out scenarios cooked up entirely within your mind, or setting up old-fashioned shootouts.

The game's third mission, Curtains Down, is set in the Paris Opera during a rehearsal. The targets are Alvaro D'Alvade and Richard Delahunt, lovers who are involved in a child smuggling and prostitution ring. When Agent 47 arrives on the premises, D'Alvade is rehearsing the execution scene of the suitably dark Tosca on the stage, while Delahunt watches from his private box.



Blood Money **requires quick thinking when things go awry. Holding a hostage narrows your options, unleashing your dark side**

There's a brilliant method for taking these men down, even if the logic behind it is esoteric. You can sneak backstage and replace a fake prop WWI pistol with a loaded gun (discreetly hidden in the pocket of a jacket waiting for you in the cloakroom). The execution scene will end far more gruesomely than intended, and Delahunt will, in his confused horror, run towards the stage to get to his deceased lover. He trips midway there, at which point the well-prepared player will set off the bomb they've rigged to the overhead chandelier, crushing Delahunt in what the papers will write off as a pair of bizarre coincidences; perhaps they were the handiwork of a suitably operatic phantom. No one will know what really happened bar 47, who can access a private balcony from the roof and witness this scheme unfold without fear of suspicion.

But in *Blood Money*, perfect murders are rare. If the series made these crimes easy, it would lose much of its sense of dark comedy, as well as the chaotic dramatic escalation that's integral to so many good yarns about murder. Some of the best moments in *Blood Money* are the ones in which everything goes horribly wrong, a lesson Curtains Down is particularly intent on teaching you.

After the tutorial's amusement park and the enormous mansion-cum-winery of the second level, the Paris Opera seems comparatively contained. Its different areas are divided up by the game's class system: a maintenance uniform is enough to get you backstage; a police outfit opens up your options; and a private security uniform, which is tricky to get quietly, will get you the highest access possible. Even so, the paranoia of your targets means getting right up close to them is never easy.

Agent 47, a stern, well-dressed man with a serious face and confident walk, is the kind of person who should come across as being right at the top of the Paris Opera's food chain. While it's sometimes questionable when he shows up for a job wearing his trademark dark suit, it makes perfect sense here. But the *Hitman* games often toy with the idea of how class and privilege operate with their costume changes. In a world where a well-tailored suit opens some doors, it's really the ugly green maintenance uniform – best acquired early by quickly sedating a poor workman as he goes to the toilet – that gets 47 the fastest access to the backstage area.

> Hitman games often toy with the idea of how class and privilege operate with their costume changes

That backstage zone can at times seem like a labyrinthine nightmare. The majority of the space is irrelevant; the theatre exists independently of your mission, full of workmen, garbage, and pieces of various sets. In some ways, it's pleasing to be allowed to be disorientated – the game doesn't simply lock every door that you don't need to walk through. But it's easy to be thrown off balance by a level that could, for many players in 2006, only be navigated easily if their screen was big enough to make the signs pointing towards the dressing rooms noticeable. A first-time player has little hope of replacing the gun and rigging the chandelier to drop before the first rehearsal is complete, and for those unaware that the rehearsal is repeated, D'Alvade's performed, non-fatal execution can be a moment for panic – an indication that the plan has failed. It's no wonder the WWI pistol that 47 is carrying contains nine bullets when D'Alvade's death only requires a single shot. Panic may not be ideal for a good assassination, but the Paris Opera seems designed to encourage you to think on your feet and take opportunities as they come.

Deviate from the plan and getting at either target with a gun usually means entering the theatre proper. It's the most open area of a level filled with corridors and small rooms. The overspill of violence from the stage or screen into the audience is a common enough theme, but this scenario brings its own sense of franticness. Escaping through the exit, having battled your way out over balustrades and plush red seats, can be far more thrilling than any ironic execution.

The flawless path through the Paris Opera, as with so many stealth games, is all about perfecting your slink and timing your movements perfectly. But it's no mistake that the level in which you ruin an opera is also the one that best exemplifies how well the game works when planned performances go awry, and that best explores the deeper elements of class structure that lie at the core of the series. Whether you fail or succeed at pulling off a 'silent' assassination, a show – either yours or theirs – is ruined in spectacular fashion. And that's what *Hitman: Blood Money* is really all about. ■

Things

THE WINGSTICK

How a decidedly low-tech weapon captured the spirit of Rage's wasteland



The Wingstick's ingenuity fits effortlessly with *Rage*'s post-apocalyptic scrapyard aesthetic. And it saves on ammo, which is a precious commodity in id Software's desolate world

From *Rage*
Developer Id Software
Origin US
Debut October 2011

Think about it, and it should be no surprise that id Software's *Rage* bears a pronounced kinship with the Australian outback. Lines can be easily traced from the FPS/racing hybrid to the cult movie Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome, with its taped-together sand buggies and post-apocalyptic grunge-punk aesthetic. From there, it's a short jump to the blue skies and red stones of Mad Max's homeland.

There's a friendly but suspicious hardship to *Rage*'s settlements that wouldn't feel out of place in Australia's most isolated communities, where the closest neighbour might be a day's drive away. *Rage*'s focus on scavenging and invention also ties it to an inhospitable landscape that Australian children are taught to never enter unprepared.

But perhaps the most blatantly Australian element of *Rage* is the Wingstick, a lethal projectile of spinning blades that can remove a head and glide right back to your hand. It's an almost too easy comparison to the boomerang.

To make a boomerang glide across a landscape, swoop into the air and fly right back into your own palm is one part luck to ten parts skill and craftsmanship. As an onlooker, though, it seems more likely to be equal parts aerodynamics and magic. To both throw and catch the same object seems like it just shouldn't be possible.

Originally, boomerangs would only return if they missed their target, giving the Australian hunter a chance to throw again. If they hit the animal, the weapon would fall to the ground. It didn't need to come back, since the hunter would have to go collect his prey anyway. As magnificent as a perfect returning boomerang throw is, then, its very elegance suggests imperfection – a target missed. In contrast, a perfect Wingstick throw kills the target and returns to your hand. *The Legend Of Zelda*'s boomerang proved just how effective this win-win scenario could be.

In the crowded FPS marketplace, which id helped pioneer, the Wingstick stands out as a rare gameplay gadget that lends character to a world constructed from the typical components of mutants, shotguns, bandits, grenades and ruins. A single throw can be read as an analogy for the lives the wasteland's survivors must endure: there's menace in throwing a blade to take off a head, and a frugal desperation in needing to get that blade back. It requires precise reflexes, but also a fair helping of luck. To have a Wingstick at the ready is to be prepared for anything.



The Wingstick can be upgraded to an advanced form, which can take out up to three targets before returning to your hand

To the joy of catching a returning boomerang, the Wingstick grafts two other delights: the meaty satisfaction of a gory headshot, and the bombastic fluke of successfully sticking a *Halo* plasma grenade to your target. The three pleasures come together in the perfect throw.

Such a trifecta of thrills is a refreshing find in an otherwise typical and old-fashioned shooter. Yet a 'perfect' throw depends on numerous variables – some are within the player's control, others entirely down to luck.

> You are constantly scanning the play spaces. When you see a chance to throw a Wingstick, you take it

The perfect Wingstick throw requires the target to be far enough away; if they are too close, the Wingstick will still kill, but it will not have had time to pick up rotation speed, and will break on contact. The same goes if the throw is too low and the Wingstick hits the target in the torso instead of the neck. Mistime the shot, and the Wingstick can go spiralling into a wall. Misjudge the spatial dimensions between yourself and your target and the Wingstick won't have room to make the return curve. Even with a perfectly aimed throw right for the head in a clear open space there is still a chance the Wingstick could break, seeing all those resources you collected and put together crumbling into the dust.

Get all this right – the distance to the enemy, the space around the foe, the height of the throw – and add a dash of luck, and the Wingstick whirls out of your hand, soaring right through the neck of the threat running towards you. Its head will pop off with a satisfying rip, and inertia will carry your enemy's body a couple more steps towards you before it stumbles. The blade will curve around and return to your hand with the satisfying rustle of having picked up a new item, and the foe has been dispatched without a single bullet or resource spent.

It's all over in a couple of seconds. A quick tap of the left bumper, or a roll of the middle finger from the W key to Q, sends the Wingstick flying forth without a moment's hesitation. There's rarely enough time to stop and consider if the throw will work or not. It has to be opportunistic; you have to know it will. *Rage*'s design insists that you are constantly scanning the play spaces for potential throws. When you see a chance to throw a Wingstick, you take it.

In a firstperson shooter that drags the old-fashioned conventions of twitchy gunplay kicking and screaming towards the modern conventions of iron sights, pseudo-open worlds and regenerating health, the Wingstick feels right at home. It ties together the unconscious muscle memory required by yesterday's shooters with the emergent spectacle glorified by the games of today.

By combining the elegance of catching a returning boomerang, the spectacular luck of landing a plasma grenade and the violent skill of taking a headshot, id has scavenged bits and pieces from the rigid shooter toolkit to produce a gadget that's truly fresh. It also one that wouldn't feel out of place in a Mad Max film, or even a futuristic Australian outback. ■

THE MAKING OF…

Batman: Arkham City

Why making the ultimate Batman game was a strictly inside job



Just as impressive as the games themselves is the speed with which their universe has gatecrashed Batman lore, spawning marketing material worthy of Hollywood blockbusters

Publisher Warner Bros Interactive
Developer Rocksteady
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin UK
Release October 2011

You can learn a lot about a person by watching them fight. In the case of Batman, though, you'll learn a lot more about the people behind the person. In Rocksteady's *Arkham* games, Batman is precise, disciplined and isolated. A counter-puncher, he can be motionless mere frames before impact and back that way before the camera's even settled. He wastes neither energy nor attention – the odds against him won't allow it.

Rocksteady is a studio of roughly 100 people making games that in other hands would require hundreds more, and making them better than hundreds of others do. It is precise, disciplined and isolated, making its games "in kind of a vacuum for a couple of years", explains game director and studio co-founder **Jamie Walker**. "Then eventually we release something and hope people like it."

The studio doesn't focus test, is deliberately selfish about the games it wants to make, and knows how to pick its battles. When game director and co-founder **Sefton Hill** jokes that *Batman: Arkham City* is the "smallest open-world game ever", it comes with serious undertones.

Arkham City was a game that would test its creator's principles from the outset. Conceived "about 12 months" before the completion of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, it challenged the studio's one-team, one-game philosophy. "Most single-project studios have a 1.5-team structure, with two games running concurrently, one in the middle of development as the other is being finalised, [and] transitioning team members between the two as required," explains Hill. "This looks great on a spreadsheet, but while it may seem counterintuitive, we believe it's much more efficient to focus on one game at a time. There are no issues with transferring people between projects in order to try to solve problems, with one project always getting negatively impacted to put out the fires on the leading one."

So over those 12 months, the team put together the basic outline for *Arkham City*'s story and added hooks into *Arkham Asylum*, such as the famous blueprints found – or rather not found until Rocksteady pointed them out – in the office of Warden Quincy Sharp. The rest of *Arkham City*, though, would have to wait.

When its time did come, however, there was never a conscious decision to make a 'big' game. "It was just that the first thing we sat down and said was: 'What's the best Batman game we can make?'" says Hill. "And, in a sense unfortunately, that was a big game. It would have been a lot easier for us if it hadn't been."



In a game where the textures stand far above other Unreal projects, shadows are still the most important visual tool

"How did we do it? I still ask myself that now," Walker laughs. "We always class ourselves as a gameplay studio rather than a technology studio. Our skillset is very much gameplay mechanics, story [and] character, which is why I think we had such a good fit with Batman. But, yeah, doing something like a city as an open world was challenging. It was a huge technical undertaking."

"We broke one of our original rules when setting up the company in a sense, because we didn't want to develop technology; that's never been our goal. Our goal was to develop games," says Hill. "Technology can get in the way of making good games, because you get obsessed with it. With *Arkham City*, it was, 'We need to take on a technological challenge, but is it worth it? Will it deliver the Batman experience we want?' And, yes, it was pretty trying. It wasn't fully working until pretty much just before we shipped. There was a lot of faith put in, and this was the first time we'd really worked on something with so many moving parts."

"We sat down and said, 'What's the best Batman game we can make?' Unfortunately, that was a big game"

Indeed, no part of *City* moves quite as much as Batman himself in his struggle to keep up with its plot, tossed as he is between a who's who of series supervillains.

"We wanted to try to tell the story of how supervillains would react to being put in a super-prison together. We felt that was really interesting, and that we'd deliberately take the story relatively quickly through a number of supervillains," says Hill. Never, he insists, was it about merchandising or flexing creative freedom. "If we'd had a story based around one character that was a better story, we'd have gone with it."

Inspired by a single image of Batman carrying The Joker's dead body out of Arkham's doors, comic writer and *Arkham Asylum* collaborator Paul Dini and studio narrative lead Paul Crocker established the five or six beats that would steer the story from start to finish. The rest was left to a development process that Hill admits "was almost as hectic at the start as at the end of *Arkham Asylum*, because while we did have a basic outline, there [was] so much in terms of play mechanics, game structure and story to get into place to allow the entire team to work effectively." It's a price of the one-game approach that he maintains is worth paying.

Topping that mechanical checklist was a desire to have Batman swoop about the city at leisure. In hindsight, much of Rocksteady's solution seems simple: you take the Escape From New York route and cordon off a game's worth of Gotham behind a giant concrete wall, drop Batman in it, and poison him with something that means he has to be done by dawn. It really didn't feel so obvious at the time, though.

"It didn't feel simple," Walker says. "It definitely didn't feel simple. You could probably go back and say we could make improvements, but it definitely did not feel simple."

Hill elaborates: "Sometimes you look at games and think, 'Oh, that game had it easy because they put streaming doors there, or this or that.' What actually happens – Nintendo are masters of this – is we try to design so that our time is spent on the game. How do we not spend ages working on things that won't actually improve it? Well, we build a wall round the outside. Players will know very clearly where the play area is, and they won't think there are things behind that.

"But originally we had a city where the wall was far less clear, and the city continued beyond it, and as you were gliding around you didn't know when you were getting to the perimeter. It was very confusing. In some ways it looked better, because you saw the city going off [into the distance], but you didn't know when you were getting to the edge of the play area.

"A lot of our design decisions are things that are transparent to the player, but allow us to focus on individual places and make them as strong as possible. Because of the city's size restrictions, for example, every enemy is hand-placed and hand-scripted to move around, and has specific dialogue. That totals up to hundreds of enemies across the chapters of the game. But we felt it was worth it, because every player's going to experience it as they glide around. ➋

"Other open-world games normally have procedural-systemic systems to deal with that, but it gives you a much more generic feeling, whereas we felt the goal in many ways was to have an open-world game but with a scripted singleplayer level of quality when you play. That's where we felt there was a really interesting space. You've got open-world games getting bigger and scripted games getting more scripted, and we felt there was an interesting place in between."

That's certainly one word for it. Others might include: ghoulish, bloody, barbaric... Far from the Gothic fairy tales of the Burton-verse, the funfair theatrics of the Schumacher-verse, or the moral shades of the Nolan-verse, the *Arkham*-verse is a videogame realm, agrees Walker, echoing the sentiments of Paul Dini. If Batman DNA only accounts for half a Batman story, then here the rest is Rocksteady, the mind behind the civil unrest in *Urban Chaos: Riot Response*.

Closer to game worlds like *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, *Arkham City* is a place that hacks at its inhabitants until they're jagged-edged. Jagged like the bottle jammed into The Penguin's face for his monocle; sharp like the knives thrust regularly, and literally, into the backs of characters good and bad. If the job of a new Batman universe is to distort characters you thought you knew, this one works overtime.

Rights holders Warner Bros and DC didn't mind so much. Their concern was only that things weren't being done for the sake of it. The death of Joker, giving players the option to have Catwoman leave Batman to die – so long as it obeyed the 'tenets of Batman' bible (a real thing, and it's big on him not killing anyone), and wasn't deliberately controversial, pretty much anything went. Not total freedom, suggests Walker, but "our own little space that we have freedom within. We decided we'd enjoy exploring how far you can push those things, and how far you can push the other characters in the world to make them interact with Batman in interesting ways. The decisions we made were based on what we were most excited about, rather than what we thought we could get away with."

And so The Joker, The Penguin – these two were seen as natural and essential turf war kingpins – Ra's al Ghul, Talia al Ghul, the Mad Hatter, Vicki Vale, Robin, Two-Face, Mr Freeze and others were stamped with what Rocksteady's artists call the 'ugly men and beautiful girls' aesthetic, many for the first time. Partly inspired by movies like The City Of Lost Children, with all its oddballs and magnifications, this would inevitably be scrutinised – excessively, we might add – for the depiction of Catwoman in particular. Decked out in honeycomb-textured military gear not for the small of breast, and dropping saucy one-liners that turn things briefly into Carry On Gotham, this was not the Selina Kyle that many were expecting.

"In terms of writing, the dialogue and [the inmates'] reactions to her, it was, 'How would they treat someone like that who turns up?'" says Hill. "And we always felt Catwoman was the second most badass character in the Batman universe, so it's much more about empowerment for us. Yeah, they badmouth her, but she just kicks their ass. In terms of her role in the game, we thought she serves as a nice palette cleanser for Batman, an amuse-bouche. It's really nice to take away Batman's powers for a while, play with the slightly different gameplay and moral compass for her, and then come back to Batman and really feel the return of all the gadgets he has."

"I do think it's interesting that Catwoman got so much attention compared to some of the other characters and the things they did to other people," says Walker. "It's interesting that in the videogame world that's still a bit off-limits, how you portray certain people. We put a broken bottle in someone's eye."

Irrespective of whether the *Arkham* take on Catwoman is an antidote to or symptom of sexism, controversy is par for the course for Batman. Some might say it's essential. The way Hill sees it, "It's about trying to make everything exist in one coherent world. Because when you've got the comic books, the source material, and even people's shared cultural understanding of who these characters are, some of those things aren't consistent. The world in which a more lighthearted portrayal of someone like The Penguin could exist can't coexist with certain other characters, yet we have to bring those together.

"If there is a weapons dealer in Gotham, he's going to have to be a pretty bad character, he's going to have seen off a lot of other bad people. You've got to really believe he can do that. So that really shaped the portrayal of The Penguin. Also, one of our goals was that even if you take Batman out, take the brand out, you're still playing what we hope is a great game. Those characters are just adding weight to the experience, and if you're new to Batman, it's about believing they would exist there. By taking that approach, inevitably we will [be controversial], because we have to shift them so much. We get people who say they don't like what we've done, but generally we don't get people saying, 'Those guys are dicks.'"

"Not to our faces," nods Walker.

That a studio that avoids fan service – caring what the outside world thought would have "totally suffocated" it, believes Walker – has won so many fans must say something. Maybe it's that 'fan' is just a really clumsy word to describe two entirely different groups of people: those who feel entitled to disrupt the creative process, and those who see it as sacrosanct. Given their say, the former might not have allowed *Arkham City* to feature such an extraordinary lineup of characters, enough to sink ten Batman films. Yet it's this that really makes the game stand apart from both its predecessor and its competition. For the high price of a videogame and all its DLC, it delivers.

"We make every game assuming there'll never be another," declares Hill when asked if this is the ultimate *Arkham* game. "In the two-and-a-half years *Arkham City* was in development, we put absolutely everything into making the best game we could. We never hold back ideas, because you never know what's around the corner." ■

Q&A



Sefton Hill
Co-founder and game director

Mark Hamill was reportedly reluctant to reprise his role as The Joker at first. Was he essential?
The relationship between Batman and The Joker is the heart of both the *Arkham* games. For me, Mark Hamill is the voice of The Joker. It's fascinating to watch him at work in the voiceover sessions. He contorts his body and you can see him transform into this twisted new personality. We're very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with him.

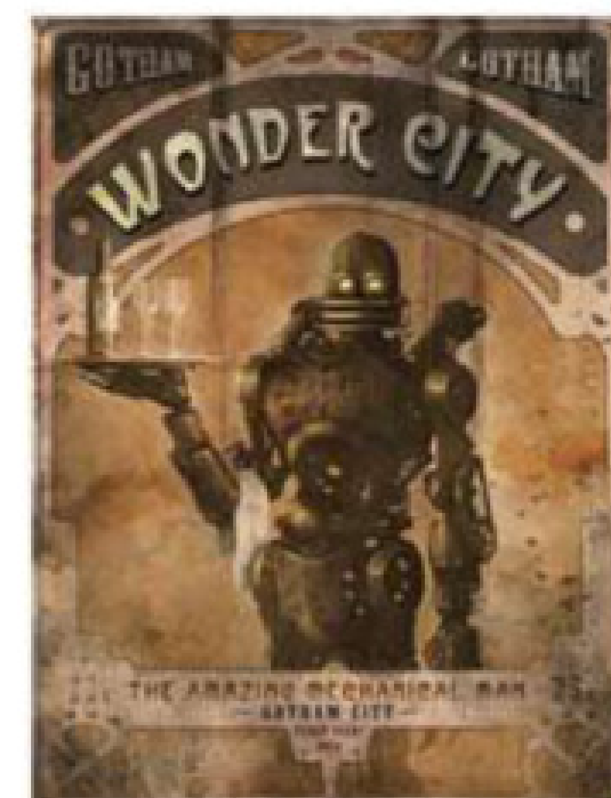
You seem comfortable with Unreal Engine.
We have a good relationship [with Epic]. One of the things we liked from the start, when we were looking for middleware, was that they have a very similar strategy to us, empowering the creators – the artists, designers and programmers. As much as we liked the tool we saw, we knew where they were driving [it]. What's great about those guys is that [the renderer] is not the only thing that drives them. It's about creating a really usable toolset.

Did you ever consider a day-night cycle?
It comes back to the brand, really – we don't feel Batman works in the day. He looks great at night. That's his time. If you've got a day-night cycle, you're getting the moving shadows and evolving world, but you don't have as beautifully crafted a lighting setup.

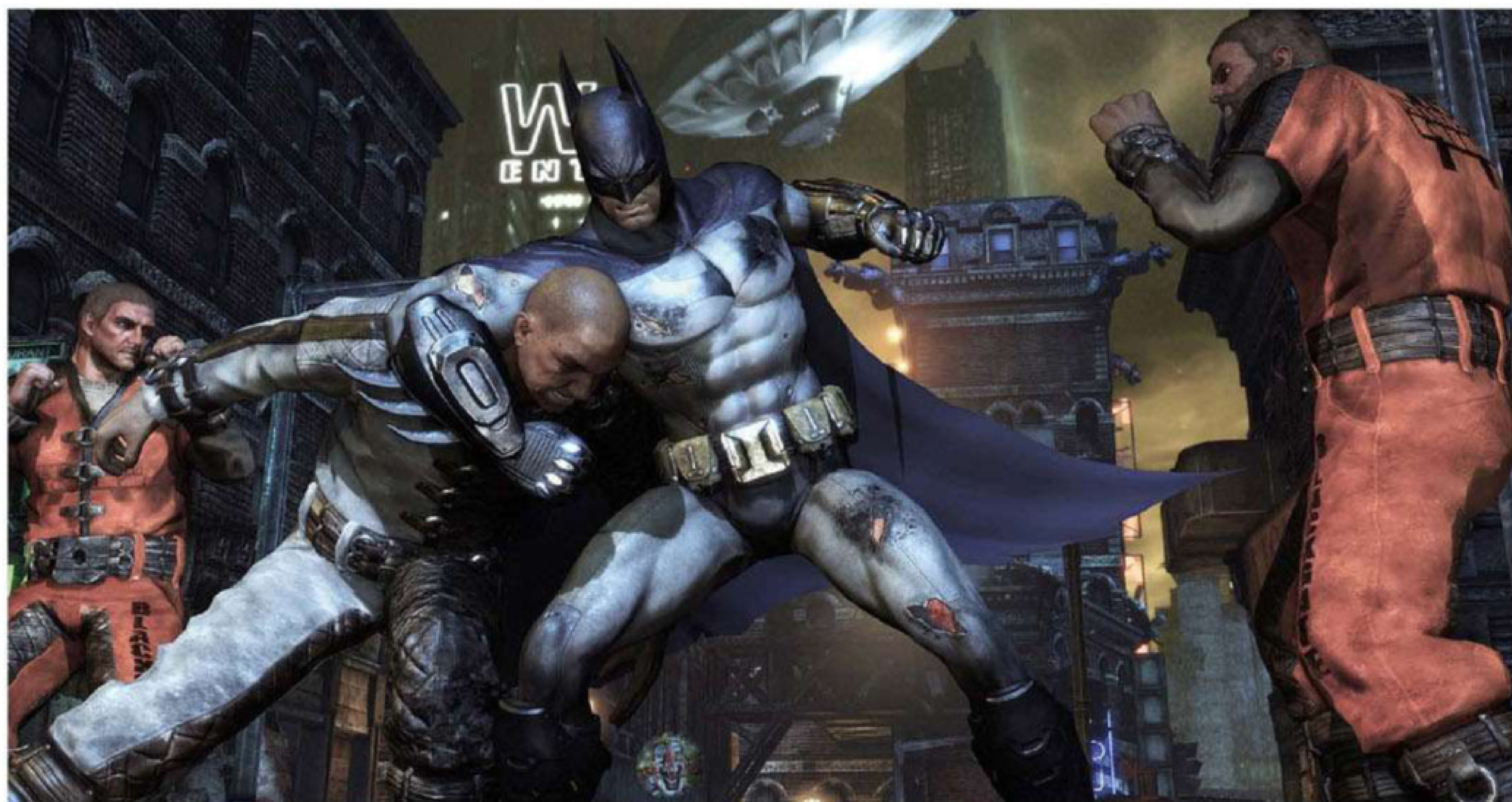




Along with the personality of its resident villain, each area of *Arkham City* bears hallmarks of previous tenants. All add up to a world – and characters – you can believe in, while enjoying the array of little nods



It's clear that the optimism of old Gotham's Wonder City is a thing of the past in *Arkham City*



Jailhouse hues

Keying into the tangle of decay and renewal that defines most takes on Gotham – a city that came into being as a twisted parallel of New York – *Arkham City* throws several schools of architecture into battle. Rocksteady's art team, led by David Hego, took the Victorian look of the first game (with its asylum being one part jail and one part turn-of-the-century sanatorium), and added a whole new layer of Art Nouveau elements to it. The fictional repurposing of a slice of Gotham into an open-air prison also allowed the team to reshape whole districts in the image of villains, such as The Joker's industrial-centre-cum-dilapidated-amusement-park, and Two-Face's artfully bisected City Hall. Despite the open-world nature of the city, locations were still crafted with an eye on players' overall trajectory through the narrative; Hego had a chart, recalls Walker, that laid out all the game's locations in sequence, from a distance revealing a coordinated and increasingly anguished shift in colour.



An adjunct to the main questline of *Asylum*, the Batcave was separated entirely from *Arkham City* as its own DLC challenge map

CREATE
GALLERY

THE ART OF...

Just Cause 2

Touring Avalanche's haven of mass destruction

This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

Though far enough apart to offer an important sense of travel, *Just Cause 2*'s ecosystems are also close enough for some gorgeous transitions of earth and sky, both taken in the stride of the studio's renderer, Avalanche Engine 2.0 

Q&A



Stefan Ljungqvist
Art director, Just Cause 2

Postcard-perfect ground-to-air-and-back-again action staged across three climates, 32 square kilometres and 24 hours of simulated day and night: *Just Cause 2* is a blockbuster all right. Art director **Stefan Ljungqvist** recalls some of the highs and lows of creating it, such as finessing grenade-flung bodies.

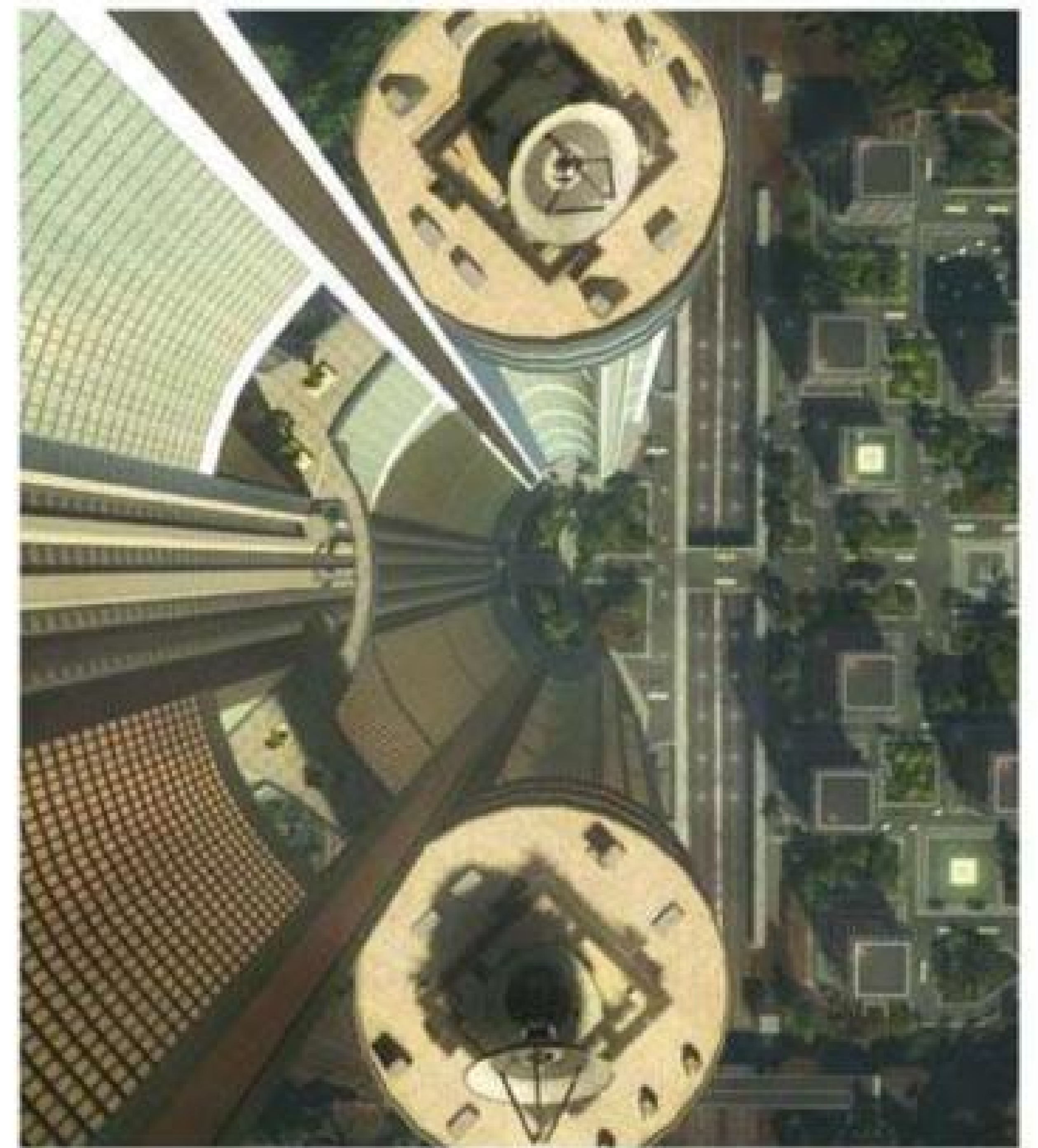
Is a despotic island nation the perfect place for an action sandbox?
We chose a banana republic for the first game – it lent itself very well to what we wanted to do. A dictatorship seemed like fundamental decor in those terms. And the lawlessness… A vast part of the western world doesn't live in a dictatorship, so it feels kind of exotic.

For the second game, I wanted to have a much greater variety in the game world. In the first [game], we pretty much had one climate zone and tricked you into thinking it had more variation than it actually had. So that was a huge thing for the second game. We all love Southeast Asia, and felt it was a great place to start. I've been boat hiking in Thailand and Vietnam, so I had loads of reference material.

A lot of console games go overboard with their assets and end up violently compressed. Not this one.
There's a lot of people on the art side at Avalanche who come from a technical background, who started in the demoscene. If you start there, you realise you can't just say, 'Oh well, it looks beautiful in Maya,' because nobody will see that unless you put it on your portfolio. If you approach it from the angle of, 'I'm an artist and I do great art assets,' I don't think that's the right one. It's about getting your hands dirty, right? We never gave up [on] that idea. We have to make it look really beautiful, and the only way you can do that – to understand how to do that – is to really get into the technical aspects as an artist.

Barely a pixel of *Just Cause 2* is unchanged from one frame to the next, whether it's the waves on the shore, the measured pedestrian hubbub, or the chemistry between sun and clouds





The animation is very sophisticated.
I love animation. It was a huge battle internally between the programmers, game designers, animators and myself. One of the things with traditional animations in games is that it requires a lot of memory. The ideas we had didn't really support the traditional method of moving forward with just keyframe or motion-captured animation. We wanted to bring in more physicalised animation, if you will. That's also expensive but it doesn't [expand] the memory footprint, and that's the huge thing in console games. So we came up with this solution called constraint-based animation, a kind of controlled physics.

When you throw a grenade in *Just Cause 2*, the way people fly through the air is very orchestrated. It's not like we apply a random ragdoll physical impulse and see what happens. I'm talking about weeks, maybe months, of figuring out the coolest way for portraying both how a solider would fly through the air, and what's most interesting to watch. Another example is when you're hanging beneath a helicopter in the game and firing. Rico [Rodriguez, the protagonist] feels very alive, and that's because there are five different systems animating him.

How did you make the game's main metropolis, Panau City, so convincing?
That city is a matter of great controversy; it almost killed a few developers. I'm serious. I think we remade it at least three times from scratch. If you're in a real city, it's not just the architectural things that make up the street life: it's people. Other things that are animated [are] the light, signposts, traffic. It's extremely complicated. We couldn't make it work to the level of fidelity we wanted. But in the end I think we did quite well. ■



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

It's time to claim our place in the media industry

At about this time of year, as the nights draw in, the children migrate back to school and the good TV starts up, the Guardian annoys me. It only does it for a day, but the sense of annoyance it brings is strong and lingers. It's called the MediaGuardian 100, a list of the top 100 most influential people in British media for the year.

The top of the list is typically occupied by big technology executives, such as Larry Page and Jony Ive; followed by publishing executives like the chairman of the BBC; then the controllers of channels and heads of newspaper groups. In the 20s or 30s, individuals who actually make media (influential columnists, TV chefs and so on) start to appear. And so it goes all the way down to 100.

My aggravation stems from the fact that this list of the great and the good almost completely ignores the game industry (this year Michael Acton Smith is the lone exception). The list skips our technology executives, such as Satoru Iwata, Don Mattrick or Kazuo Hirai, even though they're responsible for the delivery of some of the best-known media devices on the planet. It misses our publishing folks, such as Ian Livingstone, who is championing the teaching of computing skills in the classroom. It misses our innovators, like David Braben and his Raspberry Pi project.

In British media-land, a lot of value is placed on authorship. These people respect writers, actors, directors and musicians. They love to listen to the stand-up comedian give a one-woman take on the world. They appreciate voices. Perhaps this is why they often regard games askance, and why they try to push them into being authored.

One kind of media-land understanding of games is of them being at the back of the line. In the media executive mind, games are something you add to a property for extra revenue, like a Doctor Who annual or a Harry Potter lunchbox. I've sat in many meetings with these types of people while they drone on about the importance of brand values and storytelling to the game project, as if it's just another broadcast venue.

Another kind of understanding is the idea that games are artistically immature. In the university courses I've encountered, the BAFTA lectures I've attended and so on, there's often a strong theme



In the media executive mind, games are something you add on for extra revenue, like a Harry Potter lunchbox

of narrativism. There's big talk of storytelling, of games growing up and being on the verge of one day being as great as TV. Yet as I sit and listen to this I often think, 'But isn't TV the one that's dying?'

I feel this is an important point. The whole of the broadcast media space has been under threat from digital for years, not just because of piracy, but largely because of delivery. Those technology executives at the top of the MediaGuardian list spend a lot of time championing inventions that disintermediate traditional media, replacing the need for publishing with aggregation. They atomise media and treat it as what it is: files.

A book is just a file, a song is just a file, and a film is just a file. A newspaper is just a collection of text files and images. Files are cheap, and increasingly without value. Authorship is as strong as ever, but channels, publishing venues and so on all seem increasingly archaic. A writer such as Caitlin Moran is more interesting for her Twitter account than her official publications. In that sense, the MediaGuardian list reads like nothing so much as an extended obituary.

A game is not a file. Games are increasingly worlds you log into, apps you use every day and platforms for content. Michael Acton Smith is on the list because he made a great platform through which media can be served. He's created a gateway, in the same way that a newspaper or a television channel is a gateway. Games can be, and increasingly are, the new channels.

We have much more power than we realise. Although the British game industry has dropped to sixth place in the world of making big-budget broadcast-style console games, it's still an inventive place. However, it has internalised much of this sense of being the red-headed stepchild, and this needs to change. We should be lobbying to change the name of BAFTA to BAFTGA. We should be lobbying the Guardian to add some people from the game industry onto their jury to select the MediaGuardian 100.

We should also be sterner about our relationship with file publishers. They often act as though they have the power, but they increasingly need us. They currently need us to help realise the profits from their properties. However, soon they will need us to be their publisher.

Newspapers are dying, TV shows are less relevant than ever and music sales continue to slide. Broadcast-style console games likewise. But games in general? Games are building gateway after gateway, and platform after platform. Players will get their news through games, socialise through games and derive their cultural queues from games. Some already do. They will want to be entertained by comedy through games, read books set in the worlds of their games and watch movies about them, too.

Games are becoming the gateway, and soon it will be their executives, makers and leading lights who sit at the top of any power list.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com


CRYTEK
WARFACE
GEAR
OUTFIT
MISC.

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Finishing moves

My experience tells me that there are two kinds of singleplayer gamer: there are those who declare they have finished a game when they're done with it, and those who declare that they have beaten it. I believe this confusing dichotomy between 'finishers' and 'beaters' illuminates a weakness in our ability to formally discuss singleplayer games in a way that adequately describes the feelings they provide to audiences of entertainment and culture.

The singleplayer game is often a linear series of challenges. Sometimes there are linear levels through which the player is forced to progress, as in a typical platformer, such as *Super Mario Bros*, or an action-adventure game, such as one of the *Uncharted* trilogy. At other times, the player is cut loose in a fully open world where progression through spaces and challenges serves as a mutable context to a linear progression through the levels, ranks and skill trees of a character who grows over time, as in the games in the *Elder Scrolls* saga. Either way, it's the linear nature of the singleplayer game – this notion that they have a beginning, middle and end – that I believe gives rise to the finishing/beating vocabulary.

I believe that both kinds of gamer are using incorrect vocabulary. Finishers are borrowing from a narrative-centric vocabulary. We finish Great Expectations, but we don't finish *Gears Of War*. We may come to the end of the story of *Gears Of War*, but even once 'finished', so much remains. This is to say nothing of uncollected COG Tags, or going left through the streets when you could have gone right through the sewers. Generally, the singleplayer game runs out of linear narrative content before it runs out of systemic depth. You may have reached the final cutscene, but have you mastered all the weapons, strategies and tactics? Have you exhausted the possibility space of skills, equipment, weapons and enemies? The problem with the vocabulary of finishing is that it condemns the singleplayer game experience to live in the basement alongside its disenfranchised sibling, the story. It implies, slightly tragically, that once the end of the story is reached, the further development of skill and ability that may lead to mastery is somewhat irrelevant.



Like a preteen wearing his teenage sibling's running shoes, the vocabulary of multiplayer doesn't quite fit

Conversely, gamers who use the terminology of beating a game are also borrowing their vocabulary, but this time from singleplayer's other brother, the much older multiple-player game. But much like a preteen wearing his teenage sibling's running shoes, the vocabulary doesn't quite fit. In multiplayer games, we may beat our opponent, but we don't beat the game. No one ever beat chess or tennis. While most of us have beaten tic-tac-toe, this is a rare exception of a multiplayer game that has truly been beaten. Modern games, even singleplayer ones, cannot be beaten in the same way. The possibility space is many, many orders of magnitude larger. Players who say they have beaten a singleplayer game are viewing the game itself, and in most cases its designers, like an opponent. This is an obviously limiting perspective if you consider for a moment that if the goal of the singleplayer game designer was to beat players, then they would never lose. If you believe that you have beaten a singleplayer game, I would suggest you are confused about who or what your opponent is. If it's the game, then you have not beaten it; if it's the designer, then they let you win.

I suspect the real problem with this seemingly lacking terminology of beating or finishing is that we are missing an established vocabulary for expressing the experience of reaching the end of a singleplayer game. Because of this, we borrow from the two things that singleplayer games are most like: multiplayer games and stories. But as someone who has spent most of the last decade working on and thinking about singleplayer games, I think that despite their relative newness, they are both unique and significant enough to deserve their own vocabulary.

So if we're neither finishing nor beating, what should we call it when a singleplayer game experience ends? When we stop playing a singleplayer game, I believe we do so for one reason: the value of the intrinsic rewards for playing the game has fallen below the cost of the effort required to continue. First, let's consider the rewards of a singleplayer game to be the sum of the value of exposure to new content, and the value of an increasing understanding and mastery of game skills. Next, let us consider that the cost of the effort to continue is always increasing. In a good game, the cost is keeping up with increasing richness, complexity and challenge. In a bad game, the cost is overcoming increasing boredom with trivial or degenerate mechanics.

With this equation in mind, we can view a singleplayer game as having two curves that – should they cross – define the end of the game. If we wanted to name this state, we could say we 'inverted' a game, but I think that sounds lousy and using the already adopted finished or beat is good enough providing that we understand the limitations of these terms and the true nature of the player experience when they stop playing.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

A tale of two cultures

Steam is the Holy Land for indies. It's notoriously hard to get into, but epically rewarding if you do. Thousands claw at its gates and, 'Valve never replied to my email' is a common tale of woe for those left in the cold. But perhaps the book has closed on such stories with the introduction of Greenlight.

Greenlight combines the unpoliced opportunity of Apple's App Store with the democracy of Kickstarter, ushering the hordes of Steam hopefuls into a gladiatorial arena where the aggregate of the crowd's thumbs up versus their ratings down spells the difference between progressing onto the platform or continuing to battle it out with the losers of this round. A crowdsourced approval process to supplement the infamously vague and slow internal process is the idea.

When Valve suggested Tiger Style submit *Waking Mars* to Greenlight, we didn't know whether to feel miffed, terrified, flattered, or what. Since Greenlight didn't exist yet, we had no clear expectations. We decided to perceive it as an awesome opportunity. As a self-funded company, we've never had a reason to launch a campaign, but we've seen that, in addition to the obvious financial upside, a good Kickstarter showing does wonders for promotion and awareness – skills at which our company tends to flop.

We envisioned a soapbox to advocate the brutally easy case that *Waking Mars* would make a terrific Steam title, and that fans would rally around. We made a promotional video in which I stood in the wilderness talking like a presidential candidate and David Kalina demonstrated how naturally *Waking Mars* adapts to a large screen and gamepad controls. We hit Send.

There were many surprises. Unlike Kickstarter, version 1.0 of Greenlight put little emphasis on videos. It was hard to find our video, so in the first week fewer than five people watched it – presumably just our team. And the competition numbered hundreds not dozens. Users could sort by criteria such as RPG and co-op play, but not by 'Is this an actual game, or an MS Paint brainstorm for a *Minecraft* clone by a well-meaning individual still in school?' But our biggest surprise was that even when people looked at our page, they still weren't terribly interested in *Waking Mars*.



We envisioned a soapbox to advocate the brutally easy case that Waking Mars would make a terrific Steam title

Observing what excited and failed to excite the Greenlight community proved eye-opening about PC culture, from which we'd grown increasingly distant as we settled into iOS development. Here's what we saw raking in the thumbs up: *Half-Life* mods, FPSes, deathmatches, 3D, Roguelikes, zombies, sci-fi, crafting, dungeons and pixellation. In a way, exactly what you would expect, and sort of disappointing. Was this the echo chamber phenomenon, in which a group with uniform tastes reinforces its values in an enclosed environment? Was this the focus group fallacy, whereby you can't ask people what they want next because innovative ideas are hard to imagine? Is Greenlight a flawed premise because it requires active curation to create a diverse ecosystem, whereas true democracy leads to a downward spiral of LCD sameness?

Clearly, on a level playing field, *Waking Mars* wasn't jumping out at this community. For that matter, *Waking Mars* hasn't done as well on iOS as *Spider*. So it was time to look inwards: what isn't compelling about the *Waking Mars* value proposition? Our 'action gardening while caving on Mars, cultivating alien ecosystems to unveil a science-y backstory' pitch is perhaps not concise. Our 2D art can be gorgeous in motion, but doesn't make for stunning screenshots. But probably most importantly, we didn't adequately consider a certain cultural separation in some fundaments of our design.

Tiger Style aspires to appeal to adult sensibilities, and one key point is play patterns. Our games are winnable within a few hours and playable in short sessions. They are simple to learn, with depth arising from clear and visible interactions. This appeals to casual gamers. Successful Greenlight games showed a very different pattern: massive pages of stats, hundreds of hours of playtime, games offering a hardcore hobby to sink your teeth into.

Spider and *Waking Mars* were both designed for casual play patterns, but they differ in subject matter. *Spider* is about the familiar topics of romance, houses and family mysteries. *Waking Mars* trades in more hardcore fare: outer space, alien creatures and science. By being light and approachable, *Spider* was well aligned for the culture in which it succeeded. The successful Greenlight titles, with their stats, months of gameplay, gun porn and 3D zombies, aligned successfully with their culture. *Waking Mars* was taking play patterns from column A and subject matter from column B, thereby diluting its appeal to both groups.

Numerous factors contribute to success on Greenlight, or any platform, and the whole picture is never simple. However, oversimplifications tend to generate a type of truth, and the experience of examining our games under the harsh light of crowdsourcing has given us plenty to consider about spanning the gap between gaming cultures.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

A crazy notion

There is a fine line between not knowing something and being confused. Is there anything in this world better than playing a game that delivers things you had no idea existed, and then enables you to use or fight them on your way to glory? An example: do you recall the first time you ever picked up a railgun?

Such rewards are even better than reaching a tough save point or hearing fantastic characters speak great dialogue written by me. Sad but true. But the quest to provide shocks, twists, turns and rewards is not an easy one. The moment you confuse the player, you may as well pack up your bytes and go home. It's not nice to name names but *Metal Gear Solid 2*. Yep, *Metal Gear Solid 2*. I don't even… Every second you spend scratching your head and wondering about the game, you're not in the game – and if you're not in it, you're not getting the experience.

If only consistency and logic were applied. People will believe all manner of rubbish about the world they're playing in as long as it's got a set of rules they can understand, and those rules either don't change, or it makes sense if they do. The same's true of plot. Imagine you do something to make someone in a game happy, and, woah, they're angry. If you find out why, the world is right again and on you go.

Rigid formulas apply to games. All right, formulae, if you must. The more flexible and creative the game, the more rigidly these formulae must be adhered to. It sounds counterintuitive, but our ever-loyal players can experience any amount of oddnesses if it's eventually explicable and they know what to do. This is all well and good, but stop, back up, and spray Silly String to find the tripwire across the path. Having a consistent world the player understands is not the same as explaining that world.

In the past, I have been asked to kindly write backstories to explain how everything in a game came to be. That's usually a nice job, chiefly because it doesn't require 50 different ways of saying, 'We're under attack!' That, and a complex history can add richness and provide things for fans to talk about on forums. But we're amazingly adept at simply accepting a premise if someone tells it to us. I'm more than happy to buy the idea that there's a bloke trapped on a planet and he is desperate to leave. Good, the fun can start. I'm not asking why he's trapped. If it's important, I'll be told. I know better than to try to outthink the game with 'Well, why doesn't he simply build a rocket?'-type pointless speculation. I get it: he's trapped. It's a game, so to free himself he can only use the tools at his disposal.



People will believe all manner of rubbish about the world they're in as long as it's got rules they can understand

This is what I am talking about: *Portal*. I bet you got the idea of the game and its mechanics very quickly. I will add to the pile of betting, er, chips and say that I wager you were surprised and rapidly delighted by the game's minimal cast. And I'll raise the betting, er, metaphor to its theoretical maximum by wagering that you loved the sheer fascinating apparent depths of GLaDOS and went around saying, "The cake is a lie" to bewildered people. I win.

So if we're extremely good at accepting new rules and setups as long as they're consistent, how far could we push it in games, and would it be fun if we did? I suggest we could change everything multiple times in a game. Guns could suddenly heal, gravity could reverse, good guys could become bad guys, safe places could become dangerous, and so on. None of this would faze a player who's made aware that it's not a bug. We trust that the game will work, and be possible and enjoyable to play. Where it would fall down is disorder. Total randomness is what we can't deal with – not just uncertainty, but utter spoiling randomness. For example, would you play Sudoku if you had no idea how easy or difficult each game was? Yes, very probably. But would you play if there was a 50 per cent chance that the game was not solvable at all? Finding that out is no reward. By the way, I'm convinced this is the case. I hate Sudoku and stopped doing it a while ago.

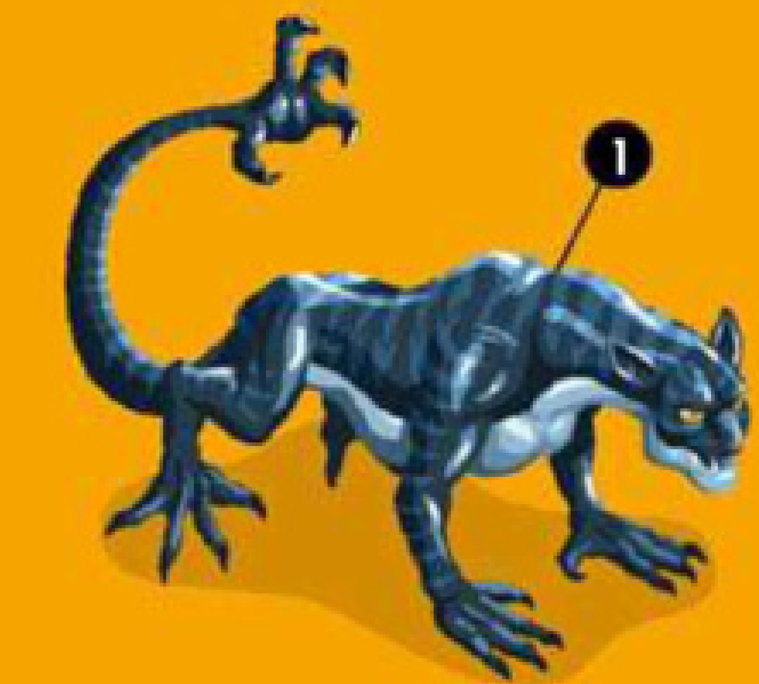
So as giant FPS games still shoot up the world like colossuses – all right, colossi – I want to have crazy games that rely on me having to accept all manner of nonsense in order to play. Muck about with physics, destroy notions of good and evil, and turn night into day. I want to celebrate the not-well-known phrase: 'It has its own bizarre but consistent logic.' The first thing these games should do is get rid of people as characters. Humans are humans, and we expect humanness from them. Yes, good folks can become bad, and love can turn to hate and all that, but without people the world is far more flexible. Aliens, robots, disembodied voices – there's still room for characters, but they're not like us. And while we're at it, let's invent a new language to learn. A new way of thinking for our crazy games. If we do, I'll play them. Well, I might play them. I don't want to have to work too hard at getting to grips with them. And one thing we can't change: we'll only pick up these games if they're fun. That goes without saying, which is why I'm saying it. Right, we're done here and I'm going to play *Tetris*.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online



Gamesys

How the UK's bingo and slots king is taking a fresh gamble on social gaming

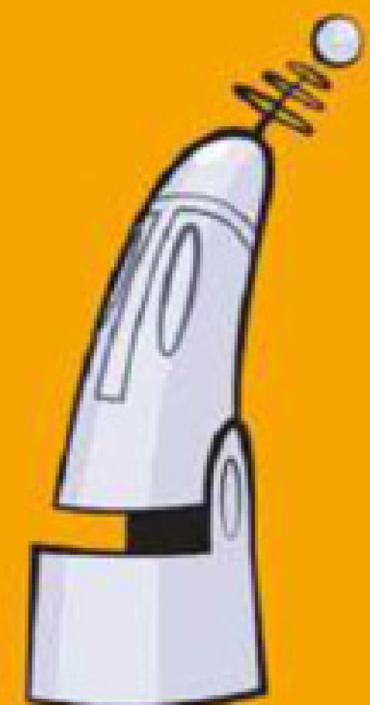
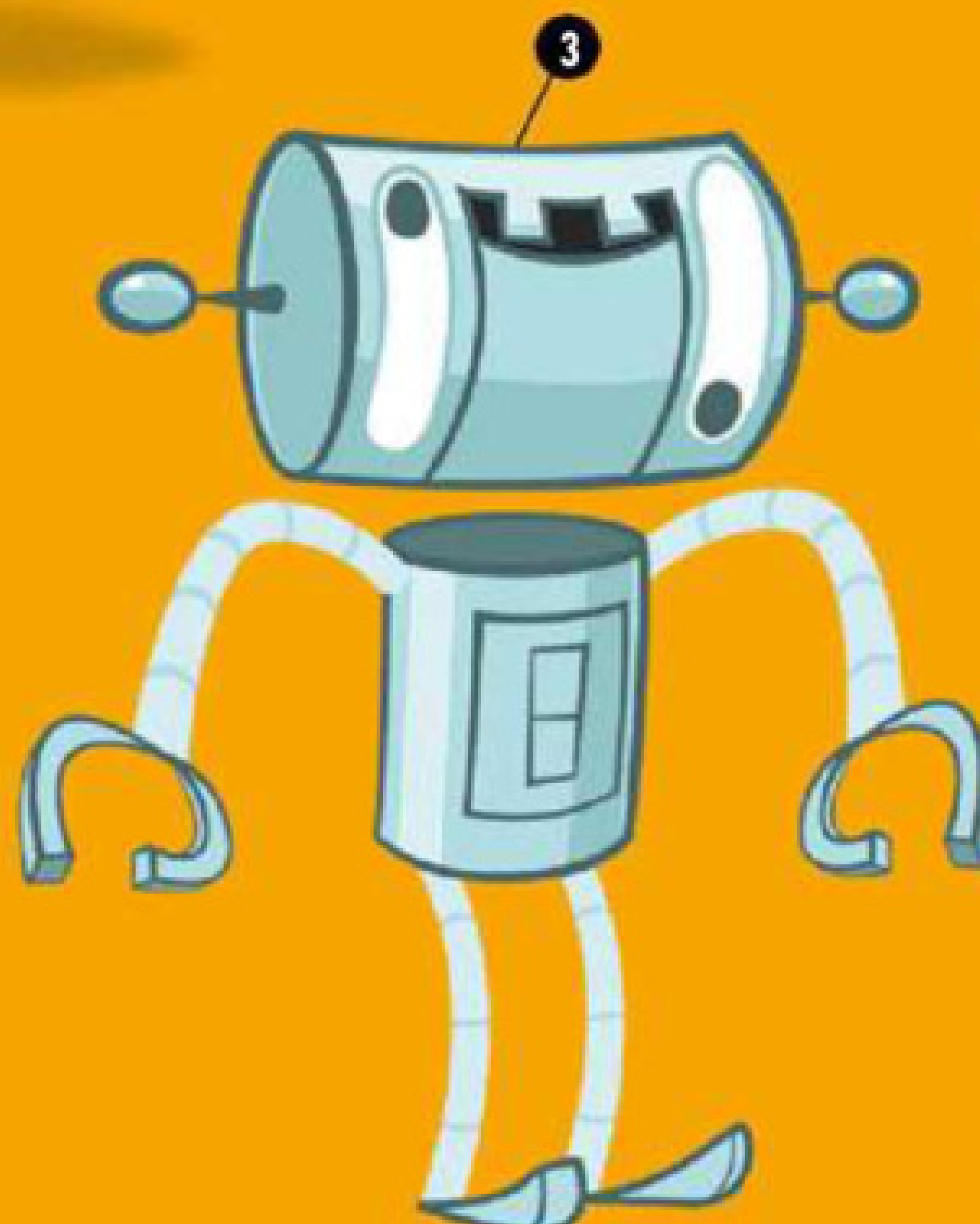
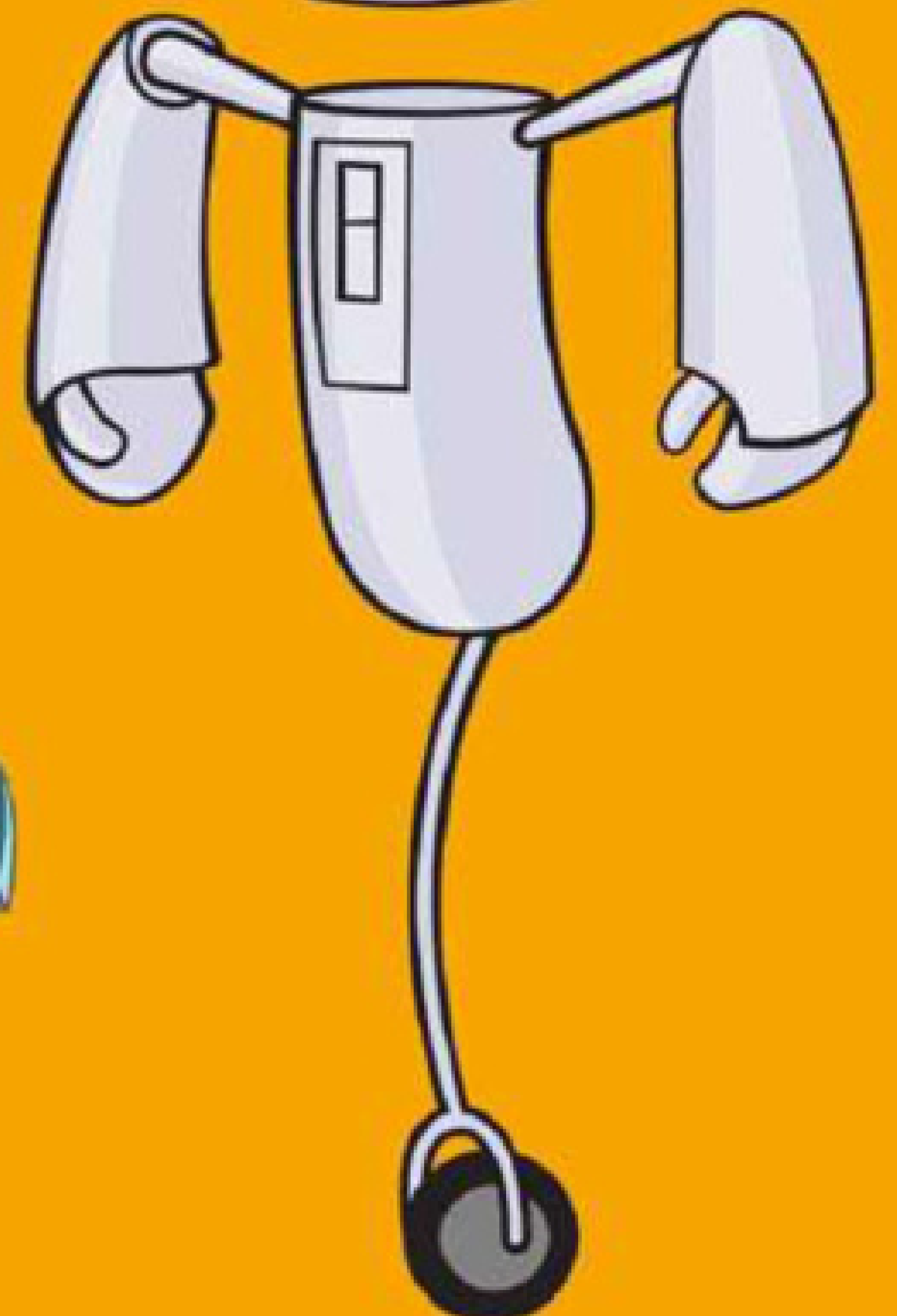










❶ There are around 100 creatures of varying size to catch in the forthcoming *Here Be Monsters*, so it'll take some time to fill up your almanac. Some can even be used as bait to tempt others into traps.
❷ *Wonderland* was launched in 2011 and introduced a quartet of mini-game asides to its slots core in an attempt to broaden its user base.
❸ Here are the eponymous stars of *Nuts & Bolts*, one of Gamesys's most popular slots games. The aesthetic is a departure from the company's usual art style, being based on '60s American cartoons

gamesys

Founded 2001
Employees 670
Key staff Noel Hayden (CEO), Lee Fenton (COO), Phill Graham (games platform architect), Tom Newton (head of social games), Joe Kennedy (head of design)
URL www.gamesyscorporate.com
Selected softography *Bingo Friendzy*
Current projects *Here Be Monsters*

On Tuesday August 7, 2012, Facebook finally launched its first real-money gambling app in the UK, a piece of software named *Bingo Friendzy*, which was developed by Gamesys. For many, such a significant launch would be the culmination of several years' work. For the London-based firm, it was merely part of an ongoing expansion that's seeing this rapidly growing company take bold strides into new markets.

Founded in 2001, Gamesys quickly became one of the leading producers of bingo- and slots-based games. Its *Jackpotjoy* brand, established in 2002, has since served clients as diverse as Orange, Ryanair and News International. Its corporate site proudly boasts a revenue figure for the group of £125 million for the 2011 fiscal year, with over 3.2 billion cash bets placed at its many online outlets. At the time of writing, the company is recruiting for 140 new positions, having filled 75 between April and July.

In other words, the Facebook deal is far from the only new venture for this ambitious studio. It's all part of a process that's seeing Gamesys expand not just into international markets – it has recently established a Swedish operation, and a move into Italy is imminent – but also into social gaming with forthcoming Facebook MMOG *Here Be Monsters*. Having also entered the mobile space with apps for iOS and Android in recent months, a company that has cornered a huge market sector is beginning to cast its net a little wider still.

Chief operating officer **Lee Fenton** believes it's the perfect time for Gamesys to make a play for smartphones. "If you look at the games of chance and virtual-currency titles, you can see that the likes of *Slotomania* are in the top five [highest-] grossing apps for iPad and for iPhone, so clearly there's a great market for it," he says. "We know that 50 per cent of our players are cash gaming, playing on their laptops [while] sitting on the sofa in front of the telly. And as the iPad is starting to replace the laptop in many people's lives around the home, we think it's a critical device to be on."

The awkward transition from browser- to app-based gaming is all but mirrored in the company's Piccadilly Circus offices, where the old is often juxtaposed with the new. Upstairs is a standard office space, holding dozens of rows of plain desks, while downstairs we're shown around a *Wonderland*-themed meeting room with myriad lamps and colourful chairs of various shapes and sizes. Artists scribble away on enormous Wacom tablets worth £2,500, yet the walls are lined with cork boards displaying hundreds of printed screengrabs of projects currently in development, covering everything from front- to back-end.



Fenton thinks the Piccadilly Circus location was worth the cost: "We think just being here in itself is inspirational"

The latter represents a process called 'wireframing', a feature of the company's iterative methodology. It's part of the trend towards agile development, which games platform architect **Phill Graham** believes offers a number of advantages. "It's all about delivering high quality in an efficient way, so it can be a lot of things to different people. The way we see it, it's all about the quick turnaround, being able to see the results of our labours and hit risks early on, because we're working in a highly scalable world, so we have to make sure we spot the risks and learn from those fast."

> "It's all about the quick turnaround, being able to see the results of our labours and hit risks early on"

There are regular scrum meetings, both large and small, where interdependent teams are invited to discuss the processes they're currently working on. Nearby, further boards hold notes that flag up potential issues, and are often accompanied by either a signature image or avatar.

This culture of constant communication extends well beyond these game-centric meetings. The firm is unusually transparent about all aspects of the business, as head of design **Joe Kennedy** explains. "Typically within the first three months, [new starters] sit down with [CEO] Noel Hayden, discuss how the business came to be, his ethos, any future plans, and they also get to go on roundtable lunches with one of the directors and generally discuss all aspects of work. And those people will be anywhere from the telemarketing guys all the way up to senior technical managers."

"Every quarter we hire out a seminar room and give everybody an overview of where we are for that quarter," adds Graham. "I certainly haven't worked for a company where I've known and actually been interested in the figures. Last year, there was a real feeling of ambition and excitement about hitting the targets across all the roles. Quite often developers and engineers, especially the back-end guys, get stuck in a corner, and they don't really know what they're doing beyond just writing some code that they're asked to write every day. But here you all feel like you're part of it."

Gamesys's readiness to openly discuss targets and profits is perhaps understandable given its focus on studying and sharing numbers of a different kind. "On our social slots games alone I think we generate a billion rows of data a day," says **Tom Newton**, head of social games. "Zynga always makes a big point of talking about how data-driven they are… we've got a gaming operations team that pores over our data so we can try to figure out what it is the players like, so we can tailor the games accordingly."

"We're in the beautiful position of being an online business, and online businesses can capture huge amounts of data," adds Fenton. "But it's the ability to act upon that data, to analyse it and then make it reflect in the gameplay very quickly, that is going to be the difference between the people who succeed and those who don't."

If Zynga, with its enormously successful *Poker* title, represents a rival in the cash-gaming space, Gamesys already has a powerful ally, having partnered with PopCap for the popular Facebook app *Lucky Gem Casino*. The alliance has had fringe benefits for both sides, as Newton explains. "I think when you get exposed to the senior guys at those companies, it does rub off a little bit. If you look at guys like John [Vechey], he's been doing that for around 12 years now, and so as you interact with people like that more frequently you get the odd little pearl of wisdom that comes out of that. By the same token, those guys don't do any really big-scale games that require as





Gamesys's collaboration with PopCap, *Lucky Gem Casino* (left), is successful, but the firm's suite of virtual currency propositions represents just 10 per cent of its business. Meanwhile, *Here Be Monsters* (above) has been in production for over 18 months, growing ever more ambitious

much client-server communication, so we have some expertise that we bring to the table. They do the same thing on their side and it all comes together really well."

The process of working with PopCap was perhaps more involved than Gamesys was used to, requiring plenty of back and forth, and regular feedback from both sides. Indeed, there are still daily calls from London to Seattle and vice versa. That isn't always the case with Gamesys's clients, however. "A lot of companies come to us and it's a very hands-off approach," says Kennedy. "A company like The Sun, for example, would say: 'We know you know what you're doing, and you've proved that time and again for the games you've created for us, so here's what we'd like.' Of course there's feedback, but it's less involved than with PopCap. And there's everything in between those [two extremes], so you get plenty of variety."

Indeed, variety is something Gamesys is keen to offer its customers. There are already over 20 *Jackpotjoy* slot machines on Facebook, while recent titles, such as *Wonderland*, are introducing more traditional videogame elements in the form of bonus games. That isn't, however, a conscious choice to attract an audience outside those who would normally play instant-win titles. "It's more like Flash allowing us to do it as we go forward," says Kennedy. "In the past, all the bonuses have been limited by the technology, so things like *Wonderland* using video and generally being a richer experience is more a question of the technology. And as we port that to iOS and whatnot, it gives us much more flexibility as well."

"There's a golden thread running through the company that says we're an entertainment business, not a gambling business," Fenton chips in. "We're looking for opportunities wherever we can [find them] to build engaging games that entertain customers. We're very willing to take risks and chances to get into [the social game] area and work with that. So far, we've been working within the technical constraints of the customer more than anything else, and I think our games are on an inexorable path to becoming better and better, and more deeply engaging."

> "I think our games are on an inexorable path to becoming better and better, and more engaging"

There's evidently a strong desire to explore new technologies and spheres, exemplified by the forthcoming *Here Be Monsters*, an ambitious Facebook MMOG that plays like a union of *FarmVille* and *Monster Hunter*. The idea is to harvest resources to build traps in order to capture a variety of creatures. These are spread across a huge map whose cities are based on the geography of real-world locations. It's a game with many familiar elements, but one of its hallmarks is a focus on communication beyond mere timeline spam. Players are encouraged to talk via a bespoke in-game chat system, rather than flooding multiple inboxes with requests for crops, and you can even become buddies without being Facebook friends.

Ostensibly it's a friendlier, less aggressively monetised experience than Zynga's Facebook titles, but underpinning it all is a similar network of systems to those powering the gambling titles. "We'll turn on the analysis during the beta," explains Newton, "and every click, every interaction pushes info into our database." Meanwhile, loot drops are governed by what he refers to as a 'slot machine mentality': sometimes you'll win big, other times you'll lose, although in that respect it's hardly any different to the likes of *Diablo*.

As the company's first step into uncharted waters, this social MMOG is a calculated risk, but a risk nonetheless. The expanding development team ("We've gone from 20 team members in May to 67 now," Newton says) demonstrates that Gamesys is able and willing to invest in this new IP, and an influx of fresh ideas has seen it grow into something much larger. It remains to be seen whether it can enjoy similar success to *Lucky Gem Casino* and *Jackpotjoy Slots*, but Gamesys might not mind too much if it doesn't – those two propositions attract 550,000 daily active users, even if virtual revenue represents only a tenth of the company's earnings.

Looking forward, it seems Gamesys is already considering new platforms, though Fenton's cooler on the idea of moving into console gaming. "It's certainly an area we've looked at previously," he admits. "But in the same way you'd look at consoles, right now you'd also look at Smart TVs and the things that are going on there. If we felt there was enough of a business model to justify the investment, then absolutely we would."

But perhaps the biggest challenge lies in reconciling a desire for creativity with a need for security. "The phrase we often use in the business is 'creative science'," says Fenton. "We think creativity is phenomenally critical to the success of the business, so we invest a lot in creatives. But we also invest in scientists. We've got to be this fantastic entertainment business, and at the back end of our infrastructure [we have to] behave like a bank. Because we're cash in, cash out, cash on deposit, players use us literally like a bank. It's tricky sometimes to get that balance right."

The decorative wall vinyls, deckchairs and giant lamps would suggest that here is a company ready to indulge its creative side, but the COO makes it clear that science is the dominant force. "One of the things I think is a differentiating factor… is that we're incredibly forensic about our success. We learn from failure, and that's fine, but we don't dwell on it. Where we can risk, we will take risks and go into areas we haven't traditionally [explored]. And if we can build and get success from that, we'll look at what we've done there incredibly closely, and how we can replicate that and create success elsewhere." ■

Q&A

Lee Fenton
COO



The wireframes show you do a lot of UI and user experience testing internally. Do you use external testers, too?
We don't do lots and lots and lots of user groups, but we do a number. We have a regular heartbeat of user groups, where we stick new products or ideas in front of them. But largely we let the data drive us. So we'll create a certain amount up front, then we'll pass that through a certain number of customers' eyes, but then, either in beta or even when we're out in market, we let the data drive us. Because sometimes customers tell you what they want to tell you, how they think they may behave, rather than how they will actually behave. Clearly, it's better to act on how they actually behave.

You've worked with many different partners, and presumably get a lot of work offers. How do you manage the workload?
I'd say we refuse nine times more jobs than we take. The main reason is the ability to focus – [the staff] here would probably laugh at that, because we try to do an awful lot at the same time, but believe me it could be a lot worse. We've had phenomenal growth over the last couple of years; last financial year we [had] 187 new employees. We just announced that in the four months from April through to July, we hired another 75. So we're in a high-growth phase. Now, we wouldn't be hiring that many [staff] if we didn't have a lot of opportunities that we were having to turn down. But it's not just opportunities to work with others, it's our own ideas – actually, we're more centred on our ideas than on working with other people. We do work with other people where we think it makes sense, but in terms of generating our own ideas, we've got tons of ideas sitting there that we haven't been able to act on yet because we haven't got the resources.

How do you keep the company ethos of a smaller firm while you're growing so quickly?
Actually, that's probably one of our most significant challenges. It's something we're really committed to – as a management team, we've sat down and said, "How do we do this as we [expand]?" And one of the things we've decided to do to ensure that we don't create a corporate monster is to not create pyramids. Even though we're now 660 strong, it's a very flat organisation. It's a very flat management structure. All of these guys have shared a beer with the CEO – quite often, actually. It's not a business, I hope, that puts people in boxes. There's very much an ethos that ideas can come from anywhere – we even have an ideas entry on our intranet where anyone in the business, down to someone taking customer calls, can pop an idea into the inbox. It's always looked at, it goes to everyone in the management team and it's usually responded to inside 24 hours. So we're very keen to pull ideas from all over the business, and very keen to ensure that we keep people creative. We think it's important to keep people innovative, celebrate the creativity inside the business, and celebrate success.





Each of the company's meeting rooms (such as the above) borrows a theme from one of its slots titles

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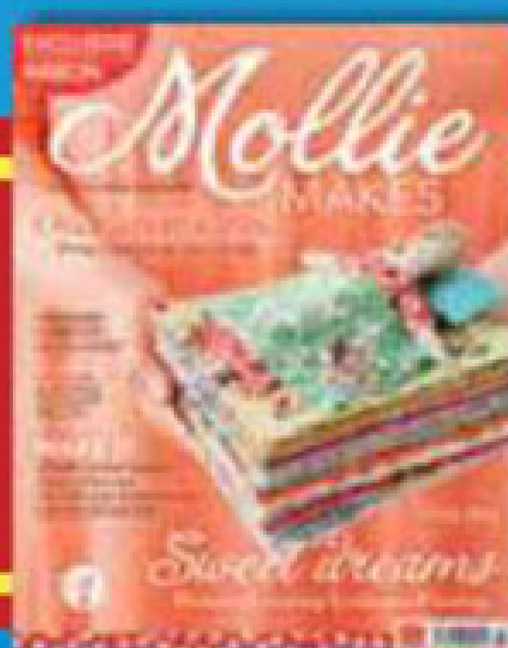


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